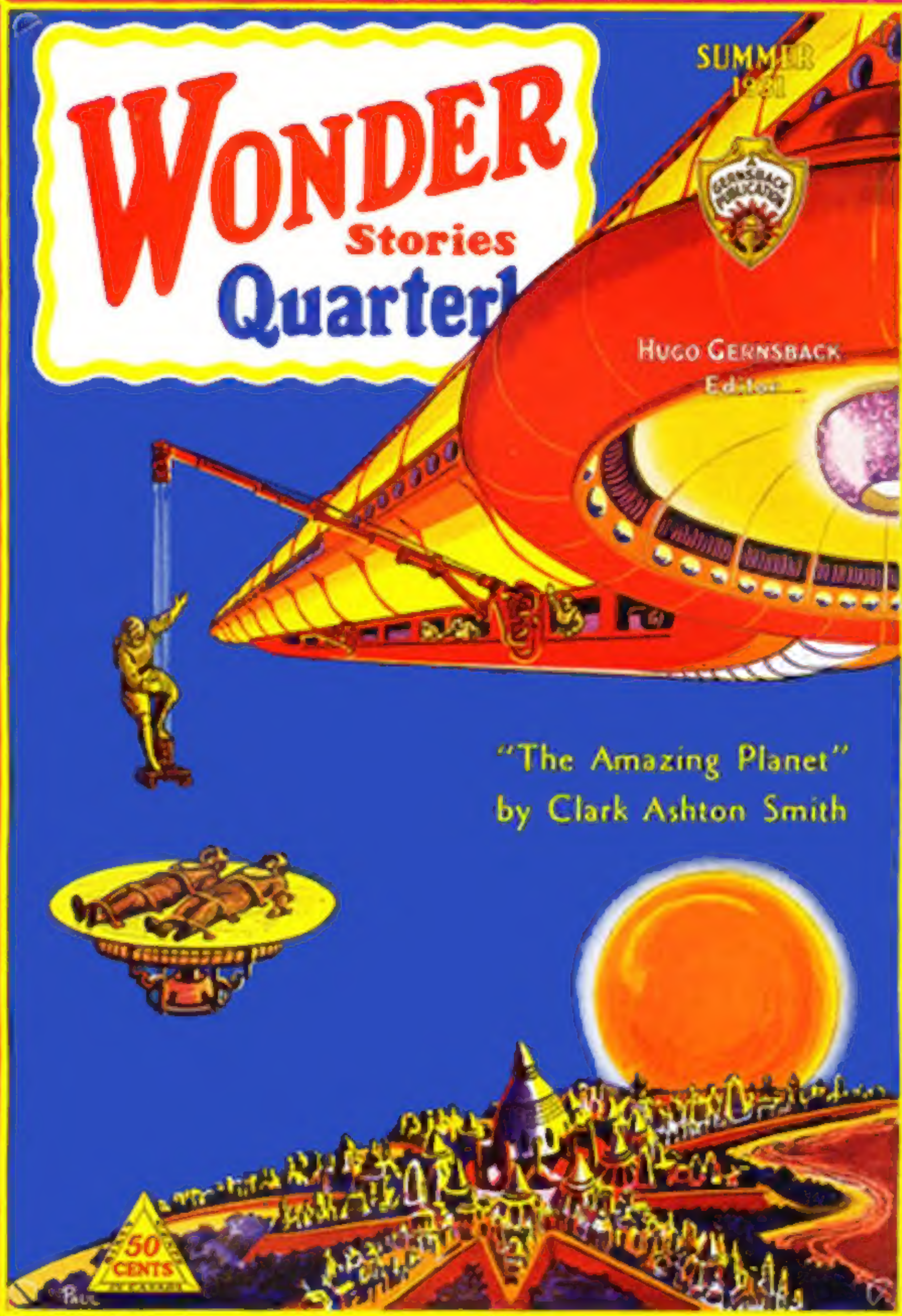
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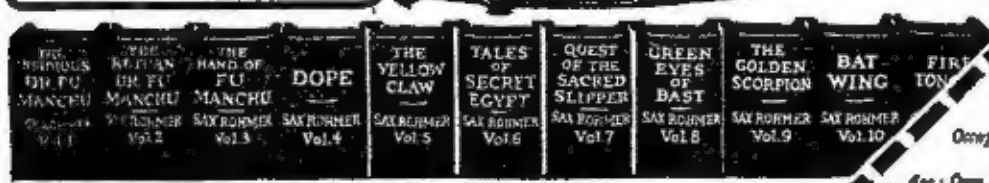

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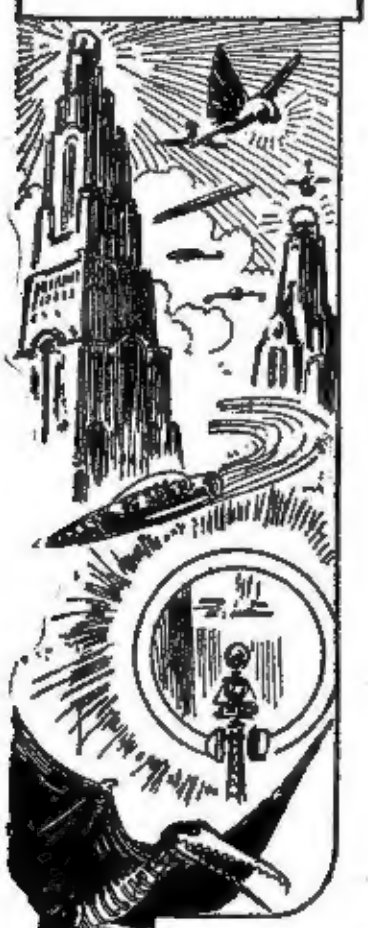

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RESULTS OF INTERPLANETARY PLOT CONTEST

IN the Spring WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY, we announced the details of a new prize contest. We asked our readers to supply plots for interplanetary stories in the form of a synopsis or outline. We also explained that the prize winners would be paid for their plots; while we would pay, in addition, our regular authors to write up the stories, which subsequently would appear in WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY.

The result of the contest has been eminently satisfactory, and our readers are to be congratulated, because the contest was the means to bring in what we believe will be most excellent stories.

Several thousand manuscripts were submitted to the editors; and it is, of course, of interest to note that the plots submitted were from readers only, for one of the conditions of the contest was that all regular authors were excluded from the contest.

We had an idea right along, from the many letters received from readers criticising authors, that the readers knew pretty well just what they wanted to read in interplanetary science fiction. We are happy to say that our judgment was correct. Many of the ideas submitted were most excellent, and the editors were hard put to it to select from the mass of plots the seven prize winners.

It is noteworthy, and we are happy to say it, that it is not always the quantity that makes for success. In fact the first prize, awarded to Mr. Thurmond, was for one of the shortest plots published. By actual word count, the entry contained only 137 words. But then, of course, it was because of the originality of the idea that the editors awarded Mr. Thurmond the first prize.

In a contest of this nature, it is, of course, impossible to print ahead of time the plots or contents of the story, for so doing, no matter how sketchy the plot, would spoil the story for the reader. For this reason, we must be content to announce only the names of the prize winners in this issue.

In the Fall QUARTERLY, we will publish the first of the prize winning stories, and we are certain you will like them.

In bringing this noteworthy contest to a close, we herewith wish to thank our readers for cooperating so enthusiastically.

Winners of Interplanetary Plot Contest as announced in the Spring Wonder Stories Quarterly

1st Prize $50.00—William Thurmond c/o W. Riviere, 106 E. Godwin, Victoria, Texas
2nd Prize $25.00—E. M. Johnston, Box 516, Collingwood, Ontario
3rd Prize $15.00—Allen Glasser, 1610 University Avenue, New York
4th Prize $10.00—Everett C. Smith, 116 East Street, Lawrence, Mass.
5th Prize $5.00—Max Jergovic, 3022 N. Street, Omaha, Nebr.
6th Prize $2.50—Lawrence Schwartzmann, 285 Montgomery St., Brooklyn, N. Y.
7th Prize $2.50—John Michel, 1094 New York Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

The Next Issue of WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY Will Be on Sale September 15, 1931

Vandals of the Void

By J. M. Walsh

(*Illustration by Paul*)

Rising gigantic over men and buildings was a spider web of metal traceries. The long yellow ray jetted from our bow projector. The buildings glowed in outline for an instant . . . . .

THE message that was to change the whole course of my life came through on the General Communicator about 10 P. M., Earth Time, while we were still within the planet's atmospheric envelope. The interstellar liner *Cosmos*, bound from New York (Earth) to Tlanan (Mars) had lifted from the Madison Landing scarcely an hour before, and we were still making altitude when the call came through from Harran. Another fifteen minutes or so, and we would have had the gravity screens out, accelerating on the first lap of our journey across the void.

This was to have been my first interplanetary trip as a private passenger, my first care-free holiday in years. Not that the journey itself held any attraction for me, or that I was new to the outer reaches of space. On the contrary. As an official of the Interplanetary Guard, that autocratic body which is responsible for the smooth running of traffic and the maintenance of law and order in the void between the inner planets, I had seen rather too much of them. Nevertheless I was looking forward to a holiday free from emergency calls, the long restful voyage to the Red Planet, and the hope, if time allowed, of a stopover on Venus on the way home.

Captain Hume—a man of Earth parentage, though he had first seen the light on Mars—and I were old friends, and I expected a heartier welcome than usual, since on this particular trip, I had no official status. As a rule the captains of the interplanetary liners look askance at us.

J. M. WALSH

WHEN man is finally able to conquer the interplanetary space, and land upon our sister planets, he will probably learn with sudden amazement how diversified the forms of life can be.

Though our authors valiantly try to picture the possible forms and shapes and personalities that life can assume, there is no doubt but that nature in her overwhelming profundity far exceeds our human powers of imagination.

We always picture other forms of life, if remotely human, as thinking, as reasoning as we do. For after all, there is a human form of thought that makes us akin. But the life of another world may have a form of thought processes that would make us despair of ever understanding it.

We know too, on earth what nations have done when they found it necessary to expand their territories to more congenial climates. What then would an alien race do if it found itself forced to change its habitation or suffer extinction? The answer would be that a terrific interplanetary cataclysm might result. Our author, who is a well known English writer of absorbing mystery tales, gives us his view of such an interplanetary upheaval.

We mean trouble for them, the endless scrutinising of passengers and documents and, often as not, the complete suspension, where the need justifies it, of the skipper's own functions. The Rule runs that when the emergency demands it a representative of the Guard has power in the interests of traffic to supersede the captain and take over the running of the craft.

I boarded the *Cosmos* early in the evening while the liner was still tilting in the slips. Captain Hume was then in his cabin, that room where he worked, slept, and often ate, right through the voyage. His own particular duties would not begin until after the take-off, and in the meanwhile the running was in the hands of the first and second officers. The first, a man named Gond with whom I had some slight acquaintance, came up to me as I crossed the gangway, and told me the skipper would be glad to see me as soon as I could make time, presumably after I got settled in my cabin.

That did not take long. To one used to the stark simplicity of the Guard-ship accommodation, the passenger cabins spelled luxury. But I did not linger, as my training had taught me how to dispose of my few belongings in the minimum of time with the minimum of effort. I merely waited to see that the baggage steward stowed my traps so that they would not cause damage if they came adrift when we shifted our gravity screens. Then I made my way in what I judged to be the direction of Hume's cabin.

The *Cosmos* was a new type of craft to me; she was the first to be commissioned of the new giant liners that were meant ultimately to ply to the outer planets, though until the entire fleet was ready she was being tried out on the home run between Earth, Mars and Venus. She embodied features with which I was not familiar, and in many ways her designers had departed from the standardized plan laid down by the Board of Control in the year 2001, when the first regular space service was begun following on that disastrous business of the War of the Planets.

I had some difficulty in finding my way, and

once I was stopped by an officer I did not know with the intimation that this part of the ship was not free to passengers. I flashed my badge at him, however, that silver model of a Guard-ship with the letters 'I. P. G.' stamped across it, asked to be directed to the captain's quarters, I had the satisfaction of seeing him give way. Rather surlily he conducted me through a maze of cross-passages to a stairway, and told me that I would find what I sought at the head.

I did. I came out on the observation deck, and here I was more at home, for in this part of the ship the original design had not been departed from.

I pressed the button on the door that would show my face in the vision-plate on the captain's table, and waited. Almost immediately the door swung open, and Hume's hearty voice cried, "Come in!"

It was like coming into another world after the bare, bleak passage outside. A warm, cozy room, lit by suffused daylight from the store-tanks, a room picked out in restful white that somehow lulled the senses and soothed the eyes. I ran a glance around even as Hume rose from his seat and came towards me with hand outstretched.

In most respects it was like many other skipper's cabin, with the televox, the ground screens of the television, the dial charts, and the thousand and one compact gadgets necessary to an interplanetary captain's hand at any hour of the day or night. One new feature, however, caught my eye, the book-machines racked up on the shelves.

"So you've come along at last, Sanders, and for once other than as a trouble-maker," Hume boomed at me. "Well, I'm glad to see you, anyhow. Make yourself comfortable. I've nothing to do for thirty clicks or so."

He nodded at the clock above his table. I had been sub-consciously aware of the humming buzz of the seconds passing, but almost on the heels of his words came the 'click-click-click' of three minutes past the hour. This, too, was a new feature. We in the Guard-ships have another type of clock, one that measures in half-seconds, for when we travel it is at a tremendous speed, and our chronometers need to be accurate to the last least degree.

Disquieting News

IN answer to a question of Hume's I told him something of my plans. My knowledge of the surface of the planets was rudimentary; I had been a dozen times in Tlanan, and once to Shangun, the capital of Venus, but these had all been flying trips—literally—and I knew nothing of either land in the way I had come to know my own world.

Hume chuckled. "Mars you'll like," he said. "Next to Tellus"—he meant Earth—"it's the sweetest little planet I know, and I've seen some and mean to see more. But Venus—" He gave a mock shudder. "Yet there are some who call it mild. It's certainly beautiful, though I can't abide the perpetual cloud-drift. I like empty skies with the hot sun pouring down."

"Others don't," I said. "I don't. Perhaps too much work in the absolute zero of space has tempered my regard for the sun."

"You chill being! But all you Guards are the same. Have something as a warmer for a change."

He did not wait for my nod, but leaning over pressed a button in the wall behind him. A panel slid away and a tray shot out with two glasses on it filled with—pure water!

He chuckled again at my look, then took a small metal box from a drawer of his table. The box held a hundred or more tiny brown pellets, of which he selected two, dropped one in each glass, and watched the water discolour as the pair dissolved. When a stream of hissing bubbles rose to the surface he handed me my glass.

"Martian Oxcta," he explained, though it was a thing I had never heard of. "It has all the virtues of Earth whiskey without its drawbacks. Drink up. You'll feel no ill after-effects."

I tasted it, just the merest sip. Liking it, I swallowed the rest at a gulp, the taste was so excellent. There was exhilaration in the draught and something more. It made me feel a new man, one whom exhaustion and the ills of the flesh must infallibly pass by. In all my interplanetary experience I had never tasted the like, and I said so.

"You wouldn't. Earthmen don't as a rule. Mars still keeps some of its own old secrets, things like this. But I happened to have been born there; as you know my wife's a Tlananian, and that counts, too."

He slipped the box back in the drawer, and I heard a click as the automatic lock engaged. The care he took of it made me wonder what could be some of those other secrets at which he had hinted, and what, if anything, would happen to anyone who betrayed them.

The Red Planet has its odd ways, as we all know, and these Martians can be touchy fellows at the best of times. They haven't the gentleness of the Venusians, whatever raptures one might go into over their womenfolk.

It came to me suddenly, sitting there, that the situation had its illegal side. I leaned forward.

"Hume," I said. "I'm a friend of yours, you're a friend of mine. Put it that way. This stuff of yours we've just drunk?"

"Yes?" He cocked one eye at me. "What about it?"

"Only this. I'm a Guard. They pick us for our qualities, integrity, moral, physical and every other way. Should I, knowing what you have, say nothing? There's an Earth-law banning alcohol, even on spaceships in the void."

He laughed heartily. "No fear of that, Jack. There's not a taste or trace of alcohol in it. Giving it to you transgresses no law in the Universe. Can you take my word for that?"

I nodded. "I know you, Hume. I've tested your word before."

"Good." He said no more about that, and there the matter dropped.

Quite a little thing, it seemed—then. Looking back, I'm not so sure. That odd Martian Oxcta, it appears to me, had something to do

with the events that were to come. But let them speak for themselves.

. . . We never felt the lift, the *Cosmos* rose so lightly from the slips. Insulated from all sound, as we were in the cabin, we heard none of the blare of departure either. Only, the warning glow of the red bulb above the dial chart on the opposite wall told us that New York, the whole American continent indeed, was sliding away beneath us.

In the old days, not twenty years off, there was none of this gentleness in the take-off. We had not as yet learnt to control gravity with our screens; we could only nullify it, a practice that sometimes had dire results.

We sat and talked, and time went on. Soon the call would come for Hume to take over and sling the ship out of the Earth's envelope of air, always a ticklish business. Already he had his eyes on the ship's communicators, awaiting reports from the various control departments, when . . . .

A shutter dropped in the wall, and a call came through from the communications room.

Hume touched a button. The face of the operator glowed in the screen and his voice came.

"Call through for Mr. Sanders," he said. "Televox."

I ROSE to my feet, and Hume caught my eye. "I'd better leave you to it," he mumbled.

"No need," I said. I knew it didn't matter. He couldn't hear what was said if I didn't wish.

I stood before the screen, my fingers on the buttons that made contact. The surface of the screen flashed the room first of all, that room in Headquarters Building I knew so well. Then the view narrowed, centering on Harran's chair, until Harran's face itself, lean, tanned and immobile in expression, completely filled the picture.

He gave me a twisted smile out of one corner of his mouth, that wry smile that boded grief and spoiled plans for someone.

"Hallo, Jack," his voice came; "release."

The command might have been Greek to Hume, but it carried a definite meaning to me. I released one button, that which intensifies the voice, and clapped my free hand over my ear. Hume could not have seen, even had he been looking, the flat black disk no larger than a penny that I held against my ear. Yet small as it was, its mechanism was marvellous. Even we of the Guard do not know the why of it, though what it does is plain to all.

The moment I put it into position the disk functioned. Harran's voice, which before had filled the room, faded away entirely; the screen itself grew dark. But I could still hear him talking, a tiny voice in my ear, clear and marvellously distinct, though a man standing at my elbow could not hear a sound. Marvellous things, these silencer disks. Just as well their use is restricted to the Guard, and the secret of their construction kept inviolate in half a dozen heads.

What Harran had to say was, if true, startling enough. Two space ships had come in that night with all communications paralyzed. In each case the trouble had occurred in open space and was preceded by a feeling of intense cold, though the heating apparatus in each ship was working perfectly. Some passengers, indeed, had succumbed to the cold; whether they could be revived had not yet been ascertained. All attempts to get in touch with landing stations had failed; none of the communications would work, and it was not until the ships had effected a landing that they could make a report.

"What is it?" I asked." Where do I come in?"

Harran told me. It might be some as yet undiscovered property of space that had caused the trouble; it might—he thought it quite likely—be the work of some alien forces, but whatever it was I was to keep an eye lifted. Should anything happen on our own particular ship I could, if I deemed it necessary, take over as Guard.

"Hold on," he cut in on his own orders, "there's something else through."

"Quickly," I warned him. "We're near the edge of the atmosphere now."

Once we were away from the Earth's atmosphere, of course, the televox would not function. Why is beyond me.

He switched back just in time to save using the slower, more cumbersome power signals.

"Reports through from entry ports of Venus and Mars," Harran took up again, "state number of craft overdue, and failing to answer calls. The Guards are being notified at their stations, but to be on the safe side we're tuning in on all, who like yourself, are space-travelling. Use your own discretion, but solve your end of the mystery if you can."

"Is that all?" I asked.

The screen flashed up again, and I saw him nod. "That's all," he answered. "Good. . . ."

He meant 'Good-bye', but the last word came to me only as the thin ghost of a whisper. We had passed beyond the atmosphere, and we were now out in free space.

I slipped the disk back into my pocket, and looked around. The cabin was empty. At some point during my talk with Harran, Hume had been called to the control-deck.

CHAPTER II

Sanders Acts

FEELING free of the cabin, feeling, too, a little bewildered by what had come through, I sat down to think the matter out. Some space-ships overdue; two others reporting excessive cold, though the heaters were working all right —that was all. Yet it was enough to galvanize Harran to activity, enough in his opinion to justify him calling me on duty.

What did it mean? What was that odd hint of alien forces? One felt disposed to say "Nonsense". The idea did flit through my brain, only to pass.

Nothing is nonsense nowadays. We cannot claim to know everything. Less than a century ago mankind sighed because there was nothing left to explore. Today we have reached beyond the world; we have discovered other worlds, or had them discover us, not quite the same, as I

may some day relate. At least we know that we have much to learn, that there are still secrets to wrest from space.

We have set foot on four of the nine planets, the other five are in the process of being explored, and we are not without hopes that soon the Galaxy may be penetrated by our space liners. Not much when one comes to think of it.

Idle speculation, of course, which took me nowhere. Hume, I must see and talk to. It was clearly a matter of which he should be informed, though what more he could do than I, it was hard to say. At least if I had to take over he would not be caught by surprise.

I got up in search of him, and the moment I sealed the door behind me I turned the other way and went instead down to my own cabin. I don't know why. Perhaps some impulse out of the void prompted me to do such a thing.

Everything was as I had left it. My baggage was still packed. My steward would have opened it and stowed my things away in the ordinary course, had I not warned him to leave it alone. There were things in it I had no wish for anyone to see.

I opened one grip and delved down to the bottom, and sighed with relief as I felt my hand touch the cold metal of the box I had hidden there. It was sealed and locked, but I broke the one and undid the other, and drew out the ray tube from its nest of cottonwool.

It was a queer little weapon, six inches long, and no thicker than a lead pencil, but it could do deadly work up to fifty yards. I slipped the full magazine of twelve charges, things no bigger than match heads, into the hollow butt and slid the catch over. A spare tube and the two thousand extra charges that were still in the box made me hesitate. I was about to slip them back into my luggage when once again I changed my mind.

There was a little ledge over my bed. One of the supporting girders of the deck above rested on the partition separating my cabin from its neighbor, and formed an angle and a dark shelf where the light did not penetrate. I slipped my little box in there, pushed it far back so that no abrupt motion of the ship would dislodge it. It would be safe there, I felt.

It was!

Then I did what I would have done before had not the change of mind come to me as I left Hume's cabin. I went in search of the man himself. On the way up to the control-room I slipped my silver badge out of my pocket and fastened it in my coat. A warning would not hurt him. He would guess the moment he saw it, and not be altogether taken by surprise.

A light metal ladder—so light a thing that had it been detached I could have carried it easily in one hand—led from the promenade deck to the control deck above. The upper end of it was closed by a bar snapped into place, charged, as I knew too well from experience, with a current that would give a nasty shock to any unauthorized person who attempted to force a passage.

A man, one of the crew, stood guard beside it with a ray tube in hand. It was all more or less show, for not once in a hundred trips does the need arise to use it. But routine is routine, and in free space the slightest deviation in the way of running things may well cause disaster, if not death, to the whole ship's company.

The man flung the tube forward dramatically as my head appeared above the level of the deck flooring, but I noticed that his fingers were nowhere near the button. The action was purely precautionary.

"I want to see Captain Hume," I said. "It's an important matter, you may tell him. The name is Sanders."

As I spoke I kept my hand clutched over the left lapel of my coat. It looked a purely nervous gesture such as any man might make, but it was not. I did it of design, to hide the blaze of the badge pinned to my coat. I had no mind to broadcast my service before the appropriate moment. Time enough to do that when it became necessary.

THE fellow stared doubtfully at me a moment.

"Stay there," he said harshly, and bending forward, peered down at me. I could see him plainer now, as he could see me. A touch of the Martian in him, I thought, though I could not be sure. After all the characteristics—voice, manner and so on—could be acquired as some of our Earthmen have already acquired them by constant association with the Martians.

The scrutiny no doubt satisfied him of my lack of evil intent, for he touched a button on the rail beside him, and the bar lifted, giving me passage. The pressure of the button, too, must have set a signal for Hume, for even as I reached the deck level a door opened and a face looked out. Then a finger beckoned.

It was Hume himself. I saw as I drew level that he looked by no means pleased to see me. Perhaps from what had gone before he already guessed at the possibilities of disturbance behind me.

"You wanted to see me?" he said, then at my look of amazement he added, "There's a device by that rail that picked up your voice and relayed it to me. A new gadget. This ship is full of them. But a thing like that can have its uses. What is the trouble now, Jack?"

I slanted an eye toward the control room. "You're not alone?" I said.

"Something for my private ear?" he said with a frown. "Well, you can say it just as well out here. There are four pairs of ears in there, you know. What is it, man?"

I dropped my hand from my lapel, and the flash of the badge caught his eye. His face went nearly purple at the sight.

"By the Planets!" he exploded. "This is intolerable. No man's command is his own these days."

"Steady," I hushed him. "It's not as bad as that, nor near it. I've no wish to supersede you. I hope it will never come to that. What I want is co-operation, and I'll tell you why."

He cooled down at that, and I gave him the gist of my communicator message. "I don't like it," he said at the end. "There may be nothing

in it, on the other hand there may be a lot. What am I to do?"

His tone was less aggressive, less hurt; he did not spark so much. I felt like insulating his anger a little further.

"What I'd like to do, if you don't mind," I said mildly, "is this. Call me the moment you sight or find your instruments recording anything out of the ordinary. I'd like a chatter with any other space ship we pass. And, of course, if we meet a Guards Patrol. . . ."

"May the Guards fuse!" he snapped. "No, I didn't mean that, Jack. But no skipper likes to think that at any click of the clock he may cease to be master in his own ship. You know that."

"I know. I see your point of view. I won't hamper or irritate you. I'd prefer even not to take command. I've never done it yet where I could find a skipper willing to work in conjunction with me."

I held out my hand. For the moment he hesitated, then gripped me.

"There will be no trouble between us, that I'll warrant you," he assured. "I'll see you're kept posted, and whoever it on watch will have instructions to call you at any hour of the twenty four if anything appears."

He stopped. His eyes lingered on my badge. I read the thought in his mind, and since I could afford to be magnanimous I was. I slipped the badge into my pocket.

"There's no need," I said, "to advertise trouble before it comes."

He looked relieved. "I'm having you put at my table," he remarked. "I'll see you there, the first meal I'm free. By the way, do you want to scan. . . .?"

"The ship's papers?" I said, and hesitated.

He met me half-way. "Perhaps it would be better if you did. I'll have the purser warned. He's a discreet soul. You'd better confide in him. You'll find the way easily to *his* office."

He walked back with me to the bar at the head of the stairs, and spoke to the man on guard.

"Mr. Sanders is to be admitted whenever he wishes," he said, and the man saluted. I fancied he looked at me more curiously than ever, and I wondered if he suspected my official status. Perhaps not, for it was no extraordinary thing for a captain's friends, within limits, to be given extra privileges.

Parey, the purser, was still in the throes of documentation when I appeared, but he took my intrusion in good part, and ushered me into his own private cabin off his office.

"I've seen you before," he said. "The skipper told me about you, too. What's it now? Something broke loose?"

"I hope not," I returned. "I'm coming to you in confidence, though," and I told him much of what I had told Hume.

I thought he was a little shaken by the revelation, but he tried to make light of it.

"You fellows are always alarmists," he said, "particularly the shore-end." It was odd how the old sea-jargon still lingered in speech; one would have thought the interplanetary service would have developed its own terms in the time.

"The shore-end, as you call it," I reminded him, "is staffed with men who have all graduated in space."

"That's the trouble," he grinned. "They don't realize that conditions have changed since they came back to the atmosphere. However, here's the passenger list, shore-compiled, so any errors aren't mine. You'll mark that."

I TOOK it, and the crew list, too. Nothing startling in either. An average ship's company, an average passenger list. Earthmen preponderantly, the minority of Martians and Venusians about equally balanced. One name caught my eye as I ran down the list. I came back to it and paused.

"Nomo Kell?" I said puzzled. "Queer name, that. It isn't of Earth origin."

Parey smiled. "Nor Mars nor Venus, either, I'll be bound. Like to see his prints?"

He meant the duplicate identification papers and photographs that are always handed in for checking at the office when an interplanetary passage is booked. No needless precaution this, either. In the early days of space travel more than one ship was pirated because care was not taken to check the origins of the passengers. Even now with our more efficient system of control the danger is by no means remote.

Strictly speaking Parey had no right to offer me the documents. They are supposed to be confidential, and even had I demanded sight of them he should have surrendered them only under protest. But I think he realized that in my case the more I knew the less harm was likely to come to anyone. And, after all, I had opened up the matter myself.

I took the papers from his hand. The details were not illuminating. They ran to the effect that Nomo Kell was a Martian citizen, qualification, the statutory one of twenty years residence; the spaces that should have contained his birthplace, parentage and so on were bracketed by the one word "Unknown".

"Queer," I commented. It looked like laxity on the part of the Martian authorities.

"Queerer still," said Parey, as he handed me the photo. "Look at this and see why."

I held the thing up to the light and looked it over. The colors came out exceptionally well, and threw the man's features into vivid relief. The scale at the side of the picture showed that he stood between seven and eight feet in height, a giant of his kind.

His eyes were an odd kind of purple; even in that color print they seemed extraordinarily alive, and—what shall I say—not so much menacing, as holding the possibility of menace. That's nearer to it. His skin where it showed, face, ears and hands, was an odd blotchy red that gave the suggestion of having been boiled.

But the queerest thing of all about him was the shape of his head. I had never seen anything like it before. It was crested. A ridge of something that looked like horn started a little above his forehead, and ran back, as I found from the note, to his occiput.

"Where in the Universe does such a one come from?" I asked. "Is he a freak?"

Parey frowned. "Anything but that," he

said. "Listen. I'll tell you something. He came across on our last drift. In talk with some other passengers certain questions about Mercury came up. He flatly contradicted the others' views, told them quite definitely they were wrong, let it appear that in some way he knew what he was talking about. See the suggestion?"

"That he is a Mercurian. But that's nonsense."

Parey looked at me owlishly. "Because we haven't made that planet yet, eh? Too close to the Sun our scientists say, too risky. Perhaps so. It'll be long before we can take the chance of exploring there. None the less it would be easier for Mercurians, granted here are any such, to come to us than it would be for us to go to them."

"We don't even know it is inhabited," I pointed out.

"We don't even know that it isn't," he countered in almost my own tones.

He was right there. There was just as much to be said for one point of view as for the other. The very closeness of the planet Mercury to the Sun has always made observation a matter of difficulty even in these days when stellar telescopy is advancing by leaps and bounds.

Seeing that was so, there was nothing to be gained by balancing one unproved theory against another equally unstable. Meanwhile the fact remained that Nomo Kell, being someone out of the ordinary, might well repay a little close attention. Not that the matter seemed likely to overlap my present duties. On the contrary it was quite distinct. Still as a Guard it was my duty to note the abnormal.

I drew up a report that night before I went to bed, condensed it as much as possible, and took it to the signals room for transmission to Harran. The operator looked it over in a puzzled fashion.

"What the blazes is this?" he asked. "Don't you know all messages must be written in a recognizable tongue?"

"That doesn't apply where I'm concerned," I said. "Send it as it stands."

"Why?" he said, a trifle defiantly.

I showed him why. He stared at my badge with a droop to his lip; it was marvellous the effect that little silver shape could have on the recalcitrant.

I could see, however, that he was still curious as to the language in which the message was written. I did not tell him that it was a tongue that had ceased to be a living language on earth nearly fifteen hundred years ago. He was too young to know that it was only three-quarters of a century since it had ceased to be taught in the schools as a so-called classical language.

In those seventy odd years, however, it had so completely dropped out of use and sight, even amongst cultured men, that when it became necessary for the Interplanetary Guard to have a means of code communication of their own it was selected as the one language least likely to be tapped. Additionally in its favor was the ease with which it could be learned.

I waited until the fading of the helio glow showed the message had gone through, and the flash-back brought an acknowledgement of its receipt. Then I went off with the intention of turning in.

I had been but a few hours on the *Cosmos*, but in that short space of time my plans had been materially altered. What further might happen before we entered the Martian atmosphere was purely a matter of conjecture. As one who has always dealt with events as they transpired I preferred not to speculate.

My cabin had a window opening on the promenade deck, and when I drew the dark slides back I found I could see across and through the quartzite windows of the hull. An odd star, wondrously bright in the absence of air, showed in the black void of space.

CHAPTER III

The Lunar Call

I AWOKE to the sound of buzzing in my ears. It took me some time to realize just where I was, and what that sound could be. Then abruptly it came to me that I had overslept, and that this was the warning note of the breakfast call. How many, I wondered, would face the tables this morning.

Not many, I fancied. Even in these enlightened days a goodly proportion of folk still suffer from a kind of space-sickness, akin, no doubt to the *mal-de-mer* that once used to attack travellers on Earth's oceans. Seemingly it is quite distinct from the malady caused by rapid acceleration through the atmosphere.

The tables were fairly crowded, I found, when I reached the saloon. Either our doctor was not a popular man—there was a fair sprinkling of ladies present—or else he knew his work so well that he preferred prevention to cure.

Hume, heavy-eyed and with his face lined, was half-way through his meal when I appeared, but his vision was as good as though he had not spent the better part of the intervening hours on control. He caught my glance as I entered and beckoned me to a vacant space beside him. I noted as I took my seat that my name had already been affixed to the chair-back. Hume's doing again, unless it was Parey's.

I ran my eye over my table companions. A Martian woman was my opposite, quite the loveliest creature I had ever seen. She could not have been more than twenty-five, and the full glow of health made her fine eyes sparkle, and her dark cheeks glow with a greater vitality than we Earth people are used to seeing on our own planet. Strange how, despite their height, these Martian girls seem so wonderful. Her name, I learnt as introductions went round, was Jansca Dirka.

The man who sat a plate away was a Dirka too, but it did not transpire whether he was her father or her brother, and there was nothing outwardly to show which he was. The way that they wear their age is, to an Earthman, another puzzling feature of the Martians. I have heard it said—how true it is I do not know—that they retain their bloom right to the very last, then

fade and die almost in a night. An uncomfortable attribute.

Knowing Hume's leaning towards his wife's folk I was not surprised to find I was the only Tellurian* at the table. I had expected more Martians if anything. Instead the remaining four were Venusians, those quaint, not unlovable people, who somehow remind one almost equally of a bird and a butterfly. Pretty they are; hardly human as we understand it, they seem. Yet. . . . but that is running ahead of my story.

Father, mother and two daughters they were, the latter three very interested in everything strange and new, yet with an interest that one felt was purely evanescent. That, I am told, is the impression one always receives on first making contact with the Venusians. How far from true of the race as a whole it is may be judged from the fact that it was the Venusians who first discovered for us the practically inexhaustible deposits of rolgar on our moon.

Rolgar, as everyone knows nowadays, is the substance—one can hardly call it a mineral—without which space-flying could not have attained its present ease and safety. When one looks back on the first crude rocket flyers and compares them with the small, neat, inexpensive and altogether reliable engines driven by rolgar one begins to realize what a debt we owe to its Venusian discoverer, after whom it was named.

The Venusian himself was an official of the Rolgar Company, he told me, and was bound for the Archimedes Landing on the Moon with a party of Earth miners. His wife and daughter were stopping over with him.

I shook my head. "No place for women," I hazarded.

He smiled. "Not such a wilderness as used to be imagined," he answered me. "Little troubles to be faced due to variations of pressure and extremes of temperature, but on the whole quite a change for a short period."

His wife and daughters seemed anxious to sample the new experience, as all women, no matter what their planet, welcome a novel sensation. Mir Ongar himself—such was his name—had paid more than one visit to our satellite, so counted himself something of an authority on it.

Hume rose from his seat in the midst of our talk, gave me a careless nod, then as he came round the back of my chair dropped a whispered word in my ear.

"Control room as soon as you're ready," he said.

The words slid so softly from the corner of his mouth that I doubt if anyone else heard them. A glance about almost assured me of this.

I could have lingered there at the table merely for the sake of stealing glances at Jansca Dirka, but something more in Hume's look than his speech made me imagine an urgency behind his parting words. Also, oddly now I come to think of it, I had a wish to see what Nomo Kell looked like in the flesh. The thought of the man intrigued me, though I was far from suspecting him to be one to run contrariwise to the Laws of Space. The mystery it might be my lot to probe arose outside, not within the flyer.

*Tellurian: a native of Tellus, the interplanetary style of the Earth.

As I came out on to the promenade deck I glanced through the quartzite windows. We were veering in now towards the moon, and its disk was beginning to fill the void ahead of us; the Earth behind was dwindling, though its size was still considerable. I judged we had not yet reached the midpoint of gravity, for an odd quiver of the hull showed the propulsive power of the rolgar engines was still on. In a little they would be cut off and we could use the moon's attraction to draw us onward until it became necessary to counteract the pull and decelerate.

"A LIGHT message for you," said Hume as I entered. He took an envelope from the drawer and handed it to me. "I thought it better not to mention the matter at table. One never knows."

"Why," I said, as I slit the envelope, "is there anyone on board, at our table in particular, you suspect as likely to tamper with a Guard's private messages?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "One never knows," he said again, this time, I felt, evasively. "At least I have no intention of running counter to your tribe. Nice thing for me and my family, if the Guards had me dis-rated for interference when I'm within a year or so of retiring on a pension from the Service."

Cautious, extra cautious man. Well, better that than a loose-lipped babbler.

I spread the flimsy paper out in front of me, and translated as I read. In one way it was of little import, though it came over Harran's signature. It was merely an acknowledgement of my over-night report, with the added note that if in the event of a Guard's ship being handy when anything untoward occurred I need not interrupt my holiday, but could hand over investigation to the patrol.

"Formal acknowledgement of my last night's report merely," I said offhandedly to Hume. Better to satisfy the man's curiosity at once than give him material on which to exercise his imagination.

"I thought as much," was his comment. "Though if more of these messages keep coming and going our operators will be getting headaches. It's a code none of them has handled before."

"If they'd lived a century ago," I said a mite incautiously, "it would have been child's play for them to read it."

He flashed a glance at me. "A dead language," he remarked, and said no more about it.

"By the way," I asked, not that it mattered much, but it gave him something new to think about, "these Dirkas, who are they? Of course," I added, as I saw him hesitate, "I can get their prints from Parey."

"No need," he answered me. "They're friends of my wife and myself. Dirka himself—her father—is a director of the Martian Canal Company. The girl is nothing. Being a Martian woman she need not work for a living."

That, from an Earth-man, was a subtle jibe at conditions on his own planet or rather the planet of his race. I passed it by, however; there was

nothing to be gained by retorting that on Earth many women preferred to work.

He eyed me curiously. "Sanders, how old are you?"

"To be exact, thirty-three," I said. "Why?"

"And unmarried as yet," he went on, not answering me direct. "Well, there's time and, friend of mine, by the comet's tail, the best I wish you is no worse luck than I had myself."

I might have thanked him for that, but I merely grinned. Thoughts of love had never come to me; even now they seemed as remote in thought as Alpha Centauri was in fact.

He ran on. "I suppose you have the whole ship's company more or less neatly taped by this," he said.

"Not much need of that," I returned. "There's only one person aboard this ship that I'm much interested in, and that only as a matter of curiosity?"

"Who," he said with a lift of the eyebrows, "is that? I had no idea we were harbouring any interesting personages—from your point of view—this trip."

"Nomo Kell," I said. "Have you seen or heard of him yet?"

He drew his eyebrows together at that, as though the name seemed familiar, yet he could not quite place it. Briefly I described the fellow to him.

"Queer," he remarked at the end. "A freak, monstrosity, if you will." Still that puzzled look lingered on his face. "It strikes something in my memory, something I wish I could recall clearly," he explained. "I can't, though. Some legend of my wife's people."

"Perhaps the other Martians on board. . .?" I hazarded.

He shook his head. "They would not know," he said quite definitely, but did not explain why.

Another of these strange taboos, thought I, a queer secret of the planet that is still, after decades of contact, a world of mystery to us Earthmen who, unlike Hume, have not been accepted into the nation.

AS I passed back along the promenade deck I met Nomo Kell himself for the first time in the flesh. It was well that I had been warned of his appearance. Had I come upon him suddenly, without any such foreknowledge of what I would see, I don't quite know how it would have affected me. Given me a high tension shock perhaps, left me gaping, doubting that my eyesight was functioning properly. Yet he was not fearsome. It was the utter unexpectedness of him that astounded.

We know nowadays that the human form is not the only intelligent kind of life in the Universe. Even on the three inner planets there are sharp divergences of the kind of bodies in which the man-equivalent intelligence resides. And there was no reason why I should look amazedly askance at what I saw. Yet I did.

Nomo Kell's print had scarcely done him justice. Or, should you like it better, it flattered him to an extent. Leave out the flaring purple of those magnetic eyes, and the crested abnormality of his head—size of his body apart—and there was little to differentiate him from the ordinary planetarian.

But seen now, walking within a few paces of me, I sensed something else. What it was I could not say with any exactness. A force, perhaps. A radiation. I could not tell. It was something that seized hold of me almost tangibly in a way I cannot describe at all lucidly.

Imagine a swimmer finding himself struggling in a sticky liquid he had a moment ago known as water, yet feeling no fear, realizing that no harm would come to him. Imagine that, I say, and you have some idea of what came over me then.

He gave me no more than one fleeting incurious glance, and passed by. I might have stood there staring after him but for a voice in my ear and the touch of a hand on my arm.

"You find him interesting, Mr. Sanders?"

I turned. It was Jansca Dirka at my elbow. I reddened. I had been caught in an act of rudeness, no light matter when one is likely to trench on touchy interplanetary conventions.

"And a little more, Miss Dirka," I said, using the Earth style of address. I have never quite accustomed myself to the long string of phrases, flowery and complimentary, with which these Martians take the place of our more direct 'Mr.' or 'Miss'.

"I thought you would," she said gravely. "You have noticed his steps?"

I had not. I hardly gave them a glance until she drew my attention to them. Now I saw that he walked with a peculiar mincing gait, a sort of gingerliness, as though each movement was carefully timed and measured.

"He seems," I said slowly as it dawned on me, "to be deliberately shortening his steps, walking with extra care as we would on the Moon's surface."

"Exactly. The *Cosmos* is adjusted to Earth gravity; we travelled Martians and Venusians have become so accustomed to its variations from our own planets that our re-action is automatic. But he . . . ." she flung out her hands with a curiously expressive gesture.

I caught the flash of the idea in her mind. "It looks almost," I said, still a trifle doubtfully, "as though he was used to a larger planet than we."

"It looks like that, almost," she mimicked, quite in my own intonation. "Which, if so, is a matter worth thinking over. I might even suggest it would be well not to let such an idea—or its opposite—lie dormant in the back of your mind."

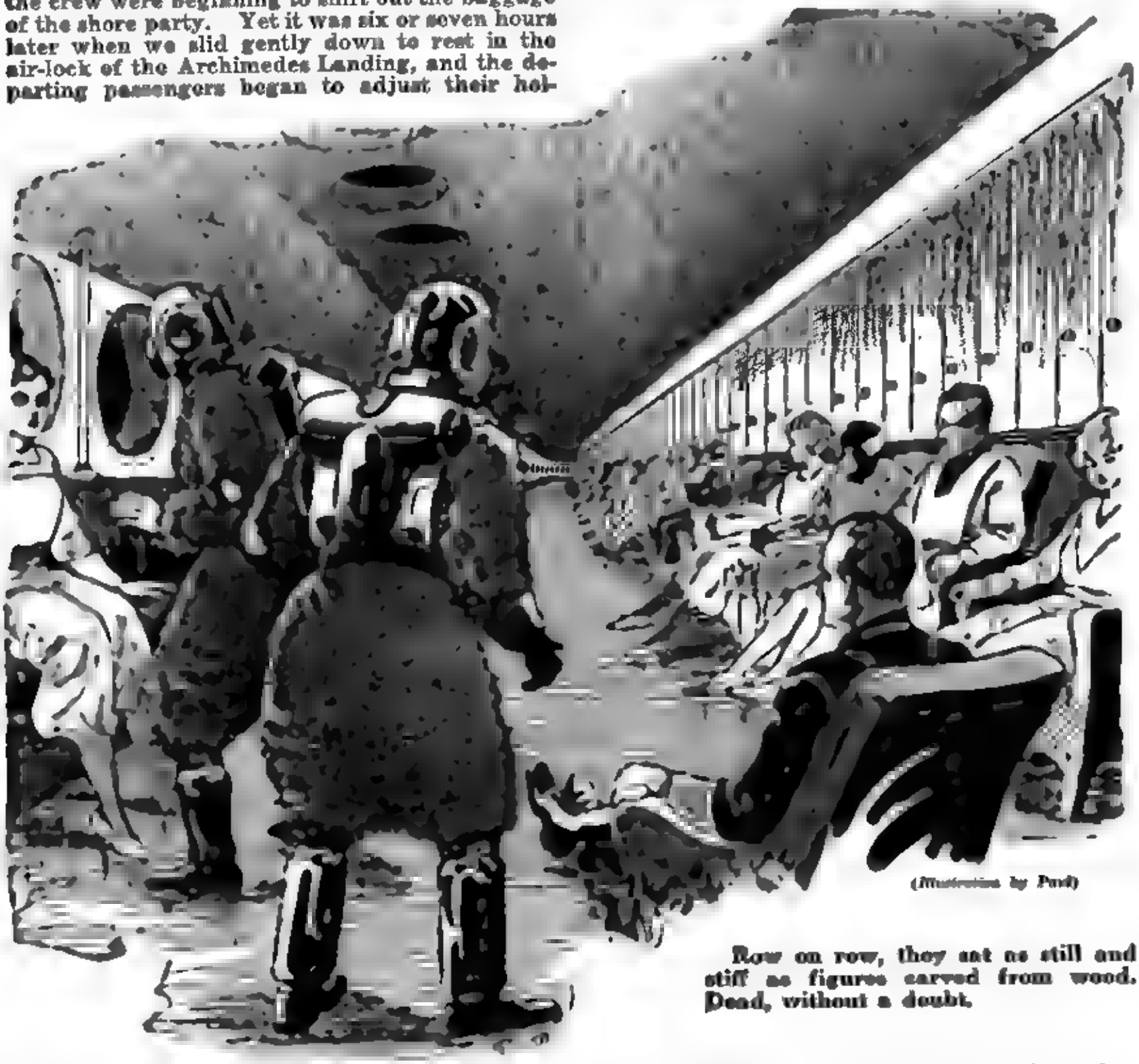
With that and a tingling glance she turned and was gone, leaving me wondering. These mysterious Martians—Hume was practically half one—with their hints and their suggestions, their puzzles and the sly thrust of their vaunted superior knowledge!

What did she see or know that I could or did not? What indeed made her suggest anything of the sort to me? No hint of my office, I could swear, had escaped Hume. He was too discreet for that. And the operators would not babble. There remained Parey as a possible talker, though only remotely so. I could only think

that somehow, uncannily, she may have guessed.

Our engines shuddered, a shiver ran through our whole framework, then died away. We had passed the mid-point of gravity, and with our motors shut off were utilizing the Moon's pull to draw us rapidly towards her.

Presently landing notices were being posted up on the boards in various parts of the ship, and the crew were beginning to shift out the baggage of the shore party. Yet it was six or seven hours later when we slid gently down to rest in the air-lock of the Archimedes Landing, and the departing passengers began to adjust their helmets before stepping out into the airless wilderness of the Moon.



(Illustration by Paul)

Row on row, they sat as still and stiff as figures carved from wood. Dead, without a doubt.

CHAPTER IV

The Wreck in the Void

I HAVE spoken of the Moon as a rless, yet that is not strictly correct. Habit, however, is a difficult thing to cast aside, and one clings stubbornly to old beliefs even in the face of the newer facts.

Our satellite, as we have known for centuries, lacks an atmosphere such as we possess, and its day and night, each of fourteen Earth days' duration, swing from torrid heat in the one to the extremes of perishing cold in the other. But in the rifts and hollows and the abysmal depths of the craters air still lingers, tenuous and all but unbreathable to us, but air nevertheless. Such life as exists on the Moon lives mostly underground, or did until the advent of the Rolgar mines.

To counteract the extremes of heat and cold, and secure a constant supply of air at earth pressure, huge buildings had been erected. Each mine is practically an enclosed city, entered through air-locks. It was on one of these air-locks that the *Cosmos* had come to rest; one of her ports was jointed to a port in the air-lock, forming a sort of enclosed gangway, through which passengers ascended and descended.

Apart from the mechanical ingenuity that aided the embarkation there was nothing of interest to see. Give me a landing in free air every time.

From where I stood I could see through the quartzite side of the promenade deck above and beyond the air-lock, while I was able at the same time to run a speculative eye over the passengers leaving and arriving. Those getting off were mostly Earth miners, rough, rugged fellows, with an odd Earth official with them, and, of course, my acquaintances the Venusian family of Mir Ongar.

There were not so many coming on board. Mostly Venusians. A couple of those ubiquitous planet-trotting Martians with them to add a leaven to the dish. We took on no Earth-men. When one comes to think of it, it is a curious thing that the Moon should hold least attraction for those who are closest to it. If it had not been for the Venusians and their discovery of rolgar I believe we would have been content for ever to sheer past it into space.

As it is the Moon—or rather its rolgar mines—gives us the means of holding the balance of Peace in the Universe; the sinews of interplanetary war are to a great extent ours, and none can fight should we decide to cut off supplies.

Our stay on the Moon was of short duration. An air-port inspector or two donned oxygen helmets and made a thorough examination of our landing gear and gravity screen apparatus before passing out. As soon as that was done and our clearance had been issued, our port was sealed and disconnected from that of the air-lock. The signal was given and the lift began.

Beneath us Archimedes dropped away until the black circle of its crater was no more than a shrivelled ring. Mars flared up redly ahead, though presently we shifted our course as though we meant to leave it on our left. This, however, was due merely to the fact that we were in a sense circle sailing. It must not be forgotten that though we were travelling in space, so was the planet of our destination.

Our course was set exactly for that point in the void, where, according to our astronomical charts, our orbit, if one can use that expression, and that of Mars would intersect. A ticklish job, you must understand, is this of space navigation, requiring a remarkable intricacy of calculation and cross-calculation.

So the days passed. Once we sighted a meteor heading, it seemed, directly for us, but our repeller ray sent it rocketing off on a new path.

* * * *

A finger touching me lightly on the shoulder brought me with a jerk out of the depths of sleep. I touched a button at the wall side of my bunk and the light tube above my head glowed brightly. I blinked. Gond, the first officer, was standing beside me. Seeing that I was awake:

"Quickly, Mr. Sanders," he said in a half-whisper. "The skipper wants you."

"What is it?" I queried.

"I don't know. Something I sighted out in the void of space. It was my control hour. I called him, he sent me to call you."

"I'm coming." I slid out of my bunk. "I'll be there—control room, I suppose—as soon as I can dress."

"Quickly, quickly," he breathed again. He knew not what it was he had sighted—some wandering mystery of space, no doubt—but that the urgent need of my presence had been impressed on him deeply enough it was plain to see.

"I won't waste a moment," I said. "You can go back. I'll follow almost on your heels."

Indeed I was half-dressed before the door shut on him. A Guard sleeps often in his clothes; when he does not he can get into them with a minimum of time.

It wanted two seconds to the minute I had allowed myself when I slipped through the door, fastening buttons as I went. At that hour no one save the officers and crew was likely to be about; I need not fear that half-clad I would run into any of the passengers.

Hume himself awaited me, dressed only in tunic and shorts. The control room was warm enough to make up for any deficiencies of costume.

"What is it?" I asked the moment I stood beside him.

HE did not reply, but motioned to the screen that communicated with our look-out 'eyes'.* The screen darkened momentarily, then flashed into light as the beam from our search-light shot out and picked up the object that had occasioned the alarm.

For some seconds I was not quite sure what it was. Possibly, because it was drifting towards us end on, I thought for the moment that it was a meteor. But the slowness of its approach should have warned me from the start that it was not that at all. Then as we swung round and I could see it broadside on it looked more like a space-flier. I would have felt satisfied it was that but for the absence of lights on board. It was a long cigar-shaped object, tapering to a point at one end, made blunt and warty at the other by the discharge tubes that clustered there.

"Can you get her name?" Hume whispered to me.

I could not. But I made sundry adjustments to the scale knobs at the side of the screen and the projection of the space flier seemed suddenly to leap forward and become closer.

With some little difficulty I managed at last to pick out her name. *"M-E 75 A/B,"* I read from the line painted near her prow.

"Mars-Earth," Hume amplified. "Carrying A and B class traffic, passengers and freight. Um. This is your job, Sanders, I think. I wonder what's gone dead in her?"

"That's yet to learn. How did you pick her up?"

"Our locater positioned her long before we were able to see her. We—Gond, that is—thought it was another meteorite. But you see it isn't."

He paused and looked at me.

*The look-out 'eye' was a selective lens that had the power of picking up an object in the same fashion as the human eye, and reflecting it on the screen. It is a very complicated piece of mechanism for all its small size and the secret of its construction is closely guarded. Invented by Loda in 1993.

"Sanders," he said abruptly. "I am in your hands. What am I to do?"

"I'd like a look at her, a closer one, if I may. Can we lay alongside?"

"We can board her if you wish."

"We'd better. I wish you'd give the orders."

He threw me a smile at that. This big bluff man had his weakness, and I played on it that night, partly from a sense of courtesy, partly because it was policy. As long as I did not interfere with his command, just so long as I asked him as favors what I was entitled to order or demand, he was my grateful, warm-hearted friend. Something of his appreciation of my consideration, my care not to humiliate him before his own officers, showed in his face.

I left it to him to give instructions, and set myself to watch the craft itself. We had veered a little, our speed was slackening, yet we would have to move round in a wide circle before, perhaps in another half-hour, we could come back and sheer inside beside the stranger craft. Our engines, which had for a time been silent—for in free space once a certain pace is reached impetus and freedom from friction carries us onward—took up an odd pulsation, just enough to steady us.

Momentarily I lost sight of the derelict, picked her up again and again from all sorts of odd angles as the movable eye mounted on our prow swung round as we altered our course. Then abruptly I saw the length of the derelict looming large beside us, a black bulk that almost filled the vision screen. There came a slight jar and I realized that our attractors had caught and held her.

Word came up from the port control that we were connecting and that our air-tight extension had been sealed against the derelict's nearest port.

As I turned away from the vision screen Hume caught my arm.

"Can I come?" he whispered in my ear. "I'm interested. . . ."

I nodded. "Certainly. I'd like a witness, and someone to check my own observations. What are her tests?"

He spoke into a tube, then turned to me. "Normal interior air pressure," he reported. "Temperature 28 degrees Fahrenheit."

I whistled. Four degrees below freezing point. Something queer there. Either she should have dropped to absolute zero, or else maintained the normal interior temperature. What in the name of the Universe was holding her constant?

I took down one of the emergency coats from a hook, a heavy furlined fabric that covered me from chin to ankle, slipped my feet into the insulated boots one of our helpers held towards me, and drew them thigh-high. With the coat drawn in and its bifurcations buttoned tightly round each leg I was insulated against cold. I could even feel the warmth of the heater wires in the fabric as the current from the battery fixed to the back thrilled through them. I drew on my gloves and someone clamped on my air-helmet, sealing it temperature tight on to the metal collar at the neck of my coat.

Each helmet contained a radio attachment that provided means of communication with each other and with the ship if necessary. I tried mine. It buzzed, and a fraction of a second later I heard Hume's voice burring in the receiver at my ear. Sealed against air and temperature variations, we could yet converse as we chose.

"Ready, Sanders?" he said, and when I answered in the affirmative he led the way down the direct ladder to the connecting port.

THE connecting port, really a long metal tube that could collapse in on itself telescope-fashion, had been extended to the wall of the derelict and clamped there. The door of the latter's port had been opened mechanically, but the blasts of normally heated air the fans were sending through our craft pulsed along the connecting tube and kept the temperature there from diminishing perceptibly.

The moment we stepped through the open port of the stranger vessel, however, we sensed the change. Despite our heated emergency kit the cold air lapped round us, clutching our limbs with icy fingers. For the moment the grip of it, no less than the inky blackness of the ship's interior, halted us. I had a feeling that the cold was not so much the absence of heat as a sentient thing in itself.

Hume touched the button of the portable light at his belt and I followed suit. The white beams sprang out, filling the place with a light akin to natural daylight.

There was nothing to see here, but then neither of us expected that there would be anything. It was up in the control departments and the living quarters that we hoped—or feared; neither of us was quite sure which—to make our discoveries.

The direct ladder that led straight to the upper control department seemed clear and, with my place as an Interplanetary Guard to sustain, I took the lead. The trap-door was closed, but it opened at a touch, and I climbed into the compartment, then turned to give a hand to my colleague. A moment later we stood together, staring round the cabin.

It was nothing as modern as its equivalent on the *Cosmos*. From some of the devices it seemed the craft was at least ten years old. I made for the log book. Search brought it to light in a drawer of the captain's table, and a comparison of dates showed that it had been written up to within twenty-four hours. Therefore whatever had happened to render the craft derelict had occurred within the measure of one Earth day.

Both of us had naturally expected to find some trace of humanity in the control room, bodies, if not living creatures. But there was no sign of anyone and no sign of a struggle. For all we could see the men on duty might have walked out the door in as orderly a fashion as though they were going ashore.

"What do you think of it?" asked Hume.

His voice buzzed with a perturbed note in my ear. "I don't know what to think," he said. "It's weird, uncanny. It's. . . ." Whatever

else he was going to say he pulled himself up with a jerk.

"We can't form any definite opinion about anything until we've searched the ship from control to keel."

"Quite so," I agreed, but as he made a move towards the door I stayed him.

"Let us read the dials before we go," I suggested.

He moved towards me again, and we studied the indicators. The engine dials showed an ample supply of fuel, and the stud had been pushed over to "Stop". No question about that then. The engines had not run down or been brought up automatically. Human agency had been at work here.

Mindful of what Harran had told me I turned to the heating machinery indicator. It showed that the apparatus was still running. Yet here we were in an atmosphere at present a few degrees below freezing point, whereas the thermometer should actually have registered something between sixty and seventy degrees Fahrenheit.

Curious on this point I turned to the wall thermometer. The glass was shattered, the mercury had vanished. From the way in which the glass had broken it was impossible to say whether the damage was deliberate or due to excessive cold. If it was the latter the control cabin itself must at one period have endured a temperature of at least forty-four degrees below zero!

Hume clutched my arm convulsively.

"What is it?" I asked, starting.

"I thought . . . . I felt," he spoke in a strained voice, "as though someone . . . . or something . . . . had just come in."

I swung round sharply. The door, which a moment or so before had been closed, was now open a space. Even as I stared the gap seemed to widen perceptibly. . . .

CHAPTER V

The Sleepers

AS a man I am no braver than the average. I know there are more things in the Universe than we have as yet managed to tabulate, forms of life, abodes of intelligence, that may appear monstrous to us, just as perhaps we appear monstrous to them. As against this I believe—and experience has yet to prove me wrong—that everything there is must face dissolution sooner or later, that it can indeed be killed suddenly and violently, provided only that one can reach a vital spot.*

My courage was oozing from the tips of my insulated boots as I turned towards the door, and already I was aware of an uncomfortable, prickly sensation about the region of my backbone.

Nevertheless the fact of another's presence gave me comfort, so, taking my ray in my free hand, I swung the door wide open with the other, and sent the beam of my lamp searching down the dark passage outside. I saw nothing. No visible entity appeared. My audiophones, which would have recorded the sound of any movement, however faint, remained stubbornly silent. Only a wave of cold that threatened to bite through the warmth of my emergency coat seemed to flow in on us like a living thing.

"Nothing there," I said in a tone meant to be reassuring.

"Nothing," Hume repeated, and I could have sworn to a faint note of relief in his voice. "I'll tell you what, Jack," he ran on, "it's the uncanniness of the place that's giving us the creeps, that's what it is. The sooner we pry into every nook and corner the better. We're losing time as it is and letting our nerves get the better of us."

There was sound good sense in that. But oh! how I wished we brought some others with us. I would have given much then to have had a couple of my own sturdy, hard-headed Guards beside me. Something of what I was thinking must have impinged on Hume's consciousness, for:

"It's a pity we didn't bring a man or two with us," he grumbled in his helmet.

"And have them take a risk we don't care to face?" I countered.

"Oh, well, there's that to it," he answered. "Let's get ahead before we start thinking other things."

He tried to push past me, no doubt in the hope that in action he would find a spur to his own courage, but I stayed him. These space captains may rate themselves as highly as they please, but when it comes to facing the dangers of the unknown it is the Guard's privilege to lead. I think he guessed my motive, for he flung me a whimsical smile, plain to see through the glass front of his helmet.

I shut the door carefully behind us. I was more or less sure now that some unnoticed motion of the vessel had sent it stealing open, but I had no mind in case I was mistaken that I should be taken unawares again. If that door should open again I would know of a certainty that there was an intelligent agency at work.

As we traversed the passage to the promenade deck my mind played round what was to me the most significant feature we had so far come across, the utter emptiness of the control room. I could not imagine any officer of the Interplanetary Service leaving his post unless there was good reason for it. And everything pointed to the supposition that the desertion, if such it could be called, had included in its scope everyone on duty.

Our beams wavered down the line of the deck, fell on the chairs spread about the space, and simultaneously we stopped dead, and looked fearfully at each other.

"Did you see it?" Hume whispered.

"See what?" I asked, for I wanted corroboration of the reliability of my own eyesight.

"The people sitting in their chairs. . . . still . . . . lifeless."

So I was not dreaming. Hume had seen it too.

*Mr. Sanders stresses this point, probably because when the first Earth-men reached the Moon they found there in the central caverns actively inimical forms of life that it seemed almost impossible to kill. It was not until Berendler's invention of the ray tube in A.D. 2,000 that they were finally exterminated. It is now known, of course, that they were endowed with a natural armor that effectively protected their vital parts, though for long the legend that these lunar animals were immortal persisted on the Earth.

"Hume," I said abruptly, "we haven't thought of it before. We've taken certain things for granted. But there should be buttons about the wall here . . . . lights . . . . better than our own portable lamps. Perhaps after all they may be working."

He swung the beam of his own lamp round, then his mittened hand closed over a stud and drew it down. Instantly the length of the promenade deck sprang into light. I shuddered. Row on row of chairs, most with occupants, met our eyes. They sat as stiff and still as figures carved from wood—dead—without a doubt.

I leaned over and touched the nearest figure, a woman, on the cheek. And even through the heated thickness of my gloves her flesh struck cold. I drew back with a gasping sigh.

"Hume," I said, "this is beyond us. We must know how these people died, if they're dead; if not what's wrong with them. And that's a doctor's job."

"That's what I'm thinking," he agreed. "I'd better call him up?" He looked to me for approval.

I nodded.

HE adjusted his communicators to the ship's. "That you, Gond?" I heard him say. "Good. It's Hume speaking. Send Dr. Spence over at once. What's he to bring? I'm sure I can't say. Oh, yes"—I'd whispered to him—"say it may be suspended animation, or cold exposure. That's data enough for him. And, yes, better send two men with him. The most reliable. And give them a ray tube each. They can reach us through the control room. No. Nothing yet . . . . of any importance."

I liked that. He was not giving anything away, forgetful, no doubt, that with the stranger ship's lights on and the two craft riding side by side, the deck we were on would be plainly visible. Thanks be, it was during the sleep hours, else we would have had eager, excited, curious, perhaps fearful passengers peering at us across the gap from the quartzite windows. I thought of that, thought, too, what might happen if some sleepless individual saw, gaped, and went off to wake his friends.

"Tell Gond," I cut in in a quick whisper, "to close his shutters on the promenade deck. Else we may be watched. What we have to do may be better done without curious onlookers."

He put that through, and I heard the click as he cut out.

"We'd better wait," I said in answer to Hume's unspoken question. "More may turn on what Spence can tell us than we think." Nevertheless I put in some of the time of waiting by looking about me. It seemed that everyone had been frozen into immobility as he or she sat. The thing itself had come upon them suddenly, for there was nothing either of surprise or horror in any face.

The doctor came with his attendants, stared at the still figures, made such tests as he could, then straightened up and faced us. In the white light of the vessel's deck I could see his face show blank through the glass front of his helmet. His hand went up to make some adjustment of his audiophone before he spoke.

"Frankly," he said in answer to my question, "I can't tell you what it is. They've been frozen, that's what it amounts to, but several of the characteristic signs are absent."

I guessed what he meant. I'd looked closely enough for the blue and purple splotches, the other signs of a man frozen to death, and had failed to find them. Frozen they were in a sense, yet perhaps turned to stone more nearly described it. A little bead of perspiration trickled from my forehead down my nose; the glass front of my helmet seemed to be clouding a little; there was a feeling of warmth that I had not noticed before beginning to permeate my body under the emergency coat. Of a sudden the meaning of it came to me.

"Hume, Spence!" I called through the audiophone, "it's getting warmer. Can't you feel it, both of you?"

Something akin to a blank consternation showed for the moment in Hume's face, the doctor looked interested, albeit a trifle puzzled.

"Don't you see?" I ran on. "This cold's disappearing. The heaters are beginning to make themselves felt. All the time they've been warming the air up, not perceptibly until now. But it's a big lift from forty-four degrees below zero up to the twenty-eight it was when we came on board. That means that from the time this happened—whatever it was—until the moment we stepped aboard the heaters have raised the temperature a matter of seventy-two degrees, a tremendous lift. What's more they're still doing it. It must be getting back to normal now."

"But why," said Hume, puzzled, "didn't the heaters freeze out too when this happened?" He made a clumsy gesture of his mittened hand to include the figures on the chairs.

The answer to that hit me almost the minute he asked the question.

"Simple," I explained. "The heater plant runs in a vacuum. External cold couldn't affect it."

"Of course." His voice was tingling. "I should have thought of that before."

"I didn't until just now." I put up my hands, clumsily, and caught at the fastenings of my helmet.

"Steady, man, what are you doing?" Hume said agitatedly.

"I'm beginning to roast. Perhaps we can take our kit off now. At least I'll be the first to try."

"But the air." Hume's voice was vibrant with warning. "We got a normal pressure, but there may be something in it, something inimical to life."

"I'll take the risk," I answered. I had seen something out of the corner of my eye, something that looked a mite uncanny. I preferred not to say what it was—yet. But it made me think that the air was safe, breathable at any rate.

I fumbled at the fastenings myself, for Hume mumbled he did not want it on his conscience if anything went wrong, and in the circumstances I was not inclined to press him to help me. But I saw the doctor was following my example,

though the two men waited to see what their skipper was doing.

THE helmet came off at last and the cool air hit my face. Cool air, not cold. The temperature, as I had surmised, was lifting degree by degree as the heaters struggled to overcome whatever it was had caused the cold. The air was breathable. At least I could sense no foreign element in it, nothing to account for that abrupt drop in temperature.

In a moment I had stripped my emergency coat, leaving only my boots. They did not matter much. The doctor was free of his trappings by this time too. He took one gulp of the air, and looked across at me, then I saw his eyes widen.

His glance had travelled past me to the chair at my back. I whirled round. The woman whom I had first examined was stirring, yes, visibly stirring. Her bosom rose and fell, gently at first, then more rapidly as she gulped the air in. Her eyes opened . . . . wide. She stared about her. Her glance fell on us. One expression after another chased with the rapidity of thought across her face; astonishment, incredulity, fear, I thought.

An inarticulate cry, a sort of strangled scream, issued from her lips, and her head dropped forward in a faint. Spence sprang to her aid.

But the little cry, almost soundless though it was, might have been some signal already agreed upon. All over the deck figures were stirring. It seemed that one surprise on another was being stacked up in front of us.

Hume with his helmet off and himself halfway out of his coat uttered an exclamation. I gasped as I followed the direction he indicated. A tall man with the insignia of an Interplanetary skipper on his collar and coat-sleeves had risen languidly from a chair some distance down the deck, coming to his feet slowly, with a bewildered expression on his face, as though he had just been roused out of a sound sleep.

His expression changed as he saw us. Surprise, anger at this seeming alien invasion of his vessel, seized on him. He made a quick movement forward, then came striding down the deck towards us.

"What . . . . what's the meaning of this?" he demanded. Then a puzzled look came into his eyes and he passed one hand across his forehead.

"How . . . . how did I get here?" he said bewilderedly. "The last I remember I was in the control room, thinking it was getting rather on the cold side, wondering if anything had gone wrong with the heaters."

I took his arm. "Captain," I said, "there's a mystery here. With your help we'll solve it. We came on you, floating in free space, without lights, you . . . . your people stretched out apparently dead . . . . as you were just now."

"Who . . . . what are you? From what ship?" he asked quickly, the light of an odd fear in his eyes.

I slipped my fingers in a pocket, found my badge, and extended it flat in my palm towards him.

"You're safe . . . . in good hands," I said. "Whatever you have to say, you can say without fear."

For the moment he hesitated, staring away from us through the quartzite windows of his ship at the black shadow of the shuttered bulk of the *Cosmos* floating a few yards away.

"My officers, the men who were with me. . ." he said a trifle incoherently, running his eyes down the long lines of chairs.

The passengers were stirring now, coming back to life, all a little bewildered if one could judge from their expressions. The woman who had fainted had now revived, and it struck me that she was the only one of the lot who had shown any sign of fear on regaining consciousness. Could it be that she alone of all that company had seen something? At least I was not minded to leave the ship until I had a chance of questioning her.

"Good," I said, "your first duty is to your officers. I think you'll find them all there, on this deck."

I was beginning to have a glimmer of what had happened, though the precise motive behind it all eluded me. "Get them together, bring them where we can talk. All that were on duty when . . . when whatever it was happened."

I dropped my voice an octave, came a little close to him. "Captain," I said, "don't look round. But tell me quick, who is that woman just behind us?"

He turned slowly as though looking down the run of the deck. I could have sworn his eyes did not so much touch the woman in passing, but:

"A Mrs. Galon," he whispered back. "An Earth-woman, she says, though I take leave to doubt it. Why?"

"We'll want her," I told him. "After we've talked with you. But see she doesn't move away. I'd rather she had no opportunity to speak with the others in the interval."

"As you wish," he said deferentially. There was magic in that little badge of mine, a magic that made me proud to belong to the Service it represented. After all we Guards may hold up schedules, and interfere in many ways, but it can never be said that we use our power for anything but good. Perhaps that is in the long run the secret of our success.

"Better," the captain shot at me in a whisper, "better get your men to tend her. Mine . . . . I don't know . . . . Everything's bound to be disorganized."

I gave the cue to Hume, and he passed the word to his two men. I gathered they were to cut Mrs. Galon out a moment after we left, shepherd her after us, and keep her waiting in the outer room until we were ready for her. As it was, while the skipper was rousing the watch on duty, the others of us unobtrusively slid between her and the rest of the passengers.

I don't think she noticed it, or if she did she gave no sign. Her interest seemed centered on Spence, perhaps because he was the first of our company with whom she had come in contact, the only one at any rate who had paid any sort of attention to her. That it had been purely

medical attention did not, I felt certain, matter in the least.

A moment it seemed and the space ship's captain came striding back to us, behind him a little straggle of his men.

"I am ready now, gentlemen," he said, "if you will follow me."

He led the way along the deck, but it struck me in the instant's glimpse I caught of his face as he passed that he appeared of a sudden to have grown worried and a little afraid.

CHAPTER VI.

A Strange Story

AS we passed off the promenade deck on to the ladder leading to the control-quarters, I flung a glance back. Mrs. Galon was sauntering along behind us, one of our men on either side of her. She was too far away for me to see how she was taking the situation, though something in the very way she moved convinced me that she was not in the least upset. Not unlikely she was feeling rather pleased in that she was the focal point of all eyes. She struck me as that type of woman.

I shut her out of my mind, deliberately, knowing that the two attendants could be relied on to do what was required.

The captain of the *M-E 75* pushed open the door we had so recently shut, switched on the light, and stood aside for us to enter. We went in followed by the duty man, the second in command, and the captain himself. When the door was shut:

"My name is James Bensen, and I am captain of the *M-E 75 A/B*," he said, rattling off his declaration. "We are homeward bound from Enghan, Mars, to London, Earth. Crew, sixteen all told. Passengers forty three adults, two children. Cargo, Marsonite* in bulk. Here"—he flung open a drawer of his table, and drew out a steel-box—"here are my papers. You may want to frank them."

"Thanks," I said, as I took them. He had made merely the formal declaration of identity and carrying traffic that is required of every space boat that is stopped and challenged by the Interplanetary Guard. Before I went further I ran through his papers, found they agreed with his declaration, and scrawled my name and status in the space provided.

"And now," I went on, "I want to know something of what occurred to you. But before you start your story it may help if I tell you what I found."

I gave him in detail a sketch of all that had transpired from the moment our locators had picked up his ship drifting free until the time he regained consciousness on his own promenade deck. I was careful, however, not to hint that other ships had apparently suffered in the same way.

His brow knitted as my story proceeded. It was plain he was more perturbed and bewildered than ever. At the end:

"I don't know that I can tell you anything much at all," he said half-apologetically. "Things were going as usual; I was in control. My second and duty man were with me, when I fancied it was getting a bit on the cold side. The indicator showed, however, that the heating machinery was running as usual."

"One moment," I interrupted, "can you give me any idea of the time of this?"

He stopped and did a brief calculation in his head. The pause made me realize that he was still running on Enghan (Martian) time. At last:

"It would be the equivalent of about eight P. M. Earth Western time," he said. "The passengers would have just finished dinner, I fancy. Yes, I'm sure of that, for I remember as I glanced at the heater dial my eyes passed over the time dial and I noted that in a few minutes it would be the hour. Where was I?"

"You were feeling the cold," I prompted.

"Oh, yes. I was on the point of ordering the duty men to call up the heater control and ask what was wrong when it seemed that I suddenly dropped into unconsciousness. At least that's what I think now must have happened. When I came back to understanding I was propped up in a chair on the promenade deck. That's about all I can tell you," he ended lamely.

"Thank you," I said formally.

He looked at me a trifle anxiously. "It doesn't help matters much further forward, does it?"

"It's hard to say . . . as yet," I told him. "Now, the others. . . ."

The second and the duty man had much the same story to tell. In each case there was this sudden feeling of intense cold, a vague wonder as to what could have caused it, then the abrupt plunge into unconsciousness, and the puzzling awakening on the promenade deck.

"On the face of it," said Bensen at the end, "it looks as though we were carried from here down the deck while we were unconscious. Though," he added thoughtfully, "I can't see how anyone could have existed through the sort of cold that we felt."

"*You* did," I pointed out. "All of you."

Bensen smiled. "I'm afraid I didn't put that too well," he said. "I should have said 'retained consciousness' rather than 'existed'. A cold, chilling enough to send us into a torpor for some hours should have had the same effect on anything. . . anybody else, I mean."

"Not necessarily," I said. "Put it this way. Suppose the people—we'll assume that's what they were—who moved you came on board in emergency suits like ours, insulated against cold. They would have experiened little or no difficulty in doing what they did."

A light sprang up in Bensen's eyes. "You're assuming, of course, that the cold was an artificially induced state, but it seems to me that there's one point you've overlooked. Assuming you're correct, the cause of the cold must have been introduced from outside, perhaps in the form of a gas. The biggest argument against

*Marsonite: a Martian ore which, when combined with cobalt steel, yields the alloy from which the shell of most space-fliers is made nowadays.

that however, is the fact that we are to all intents and purposes hermetically sealed between ports, besides being insulated against the cold of space."

"We're dealing with facts," I said a trifle testily, "not with theories. The fact is that something happened here to lower the temperature to such a degree that everyone lost consciousness. The heaters are functioning perfectly normally, so whatever occurred was not due to any breakdown on their part.

"And if you want any further evidence that it was the work of an intelligent agency you have it in the fact that you and the others on duty recovered consciousness in another part of the ship. In plain English while you were under the influence you were taken from the control room to the promenade deck and left there."

The captain regarded me crestfallen. There was no gainsaying what I had said. Facts are facts; in this case, however incredible they might seem there was no denying their existence.

"That's true," he admitted wryly, and looked to me for the next move.

"That being so," I went on, "the point to clear up at the start is whether the trouble originated on board or arrived from outer space. We've already, you see, come to the conclusion that it was the work of intelligent beings."

"You mean to say," Bensen cut in with a light in his eyes, "that there's a possibility that someone on board, some passenger perhaps, was at the back of this?"

"It's not impossible," I answered, but I spoke a moment too soon, for the gleam faded from his eyes before I had the second word out of my mouth.

"No, it couldn't have been a passenger, or indeed anyone on this vessel," he said reluctantly. "That's too patently impossible."

"In what way?" I demanded.

"Cold like heat has to be manufactured," he explained. "This kind of cold at least that is not so much the absence of warmth as a definitely induced state in itself. You need apparatus and chemicals and so on."

I nodded. I saw what he was driving at. Even in the fourth decade of the twentieth century science was beginning to realize that cold was not so much the absence of heat, but a state quite as distinct and as readily induced, even though it happened to be at the other end of the temperature scale.

A homely illustration of this was, as a matter of fact, to be found in the old ice-making plants, or more obviously still in the whole system of artificial refrigeration. Of course Bensen would know this. A space-liner skipper must be a man of definite educational qualifications, and periodically he has to face the examiners and show that he has kept abreast of the science of his calling.

"And what you're working up to, I've no doubt," I said, "is that no such apparatus or chemicals could possibly be smuggled on board. I know the examination of passengers' baggage on embarking is pretty strict at the Earth ports, but how about the other planets?"

"Mars," Hume put in in his deep voice, "is even stricter if possible. No, my friend, you can rest assured that nothing of the sort could have got past the examiners at Enghan."

"Very good," I said. "That's impossible. Remains the other alternative, then, that some space visitors half-froze you into a state of unconsciousness, then boarded the vessel, with what object has yet to transpire."

"One moment." It was Hume who interrupted. "Tell me why everyone was half-frozen—if you're correct in saying that—instead of being wholly frozen, stiff and stark."

"The answer seems simple enough," I retorted. "The heaters were running all the time, and once the nadir of temperature was reached they gradually managed to overcome the condition. More plainly, no one was left in the frozen state long enough for harm to ensue."

The two captains nodded almost together. "Seems feasible," Hume agreed.

"But even that's only the beginning," Bensen said glumly. "Admitting we've reasoned rightly up to this juncture, admitting further that by some means yet to be discovered space raiders made an entrance to the ship, we've still to settle who or what they were, and what exactly they came for."

"What of value have you on board?"

"Nothing," he told me, "other than our Marsonite cargo, and that as you can see from the indicators"—he pointed to the cargo dial on the wall—"still shows intact. Looks as if the whole thing was absolutely without motive."

I wondered. I would have liked to have known what, if anything, had been removed from those other space ships Harran had told me about. Of a sudden an idea swept into the forefront of my brain.

"If I'm not mistaken," I said, quickly, "we have a witness of sorts."

The others looked a question.

"Mrs. Galon," I said. "I think she knows or has seen something. Bring her in, somebody."

"Of course." Bensen's tone suggested that he should have thought of her before, was blaming himself not having taken her into his calculations.

A Strange Story

HE stepped to the door and beckoned to our two men to bring the woman in.

She came, glancing questioningly from one to the other of our little group; even the presence of the doctor did not seem to reassure her. I imagine that during the time of waiting she must have been turning matters over in her mind, must have been wondering and, perhaps, finding, a lengthening fear beginning to throw its shadow across her path.

Yet she was a woman of character and decision. Before any of us could speak—the slowness was mine in all truth, for the initiative had been left to me—she lifted her head, quite regally, and swept us with a glance different from that she had given us only a moment ago. This was something imperious, one could almost call it defiant.

"Well, gentlemen," she said, "what is the rea-

son why I have been brought here and kept under guard awaiting your pleasure?" Her voice had a clear note in it, rather on the musical side; her dark eyes glowed with life. They flashed even brighter as she turned to the one man of our little group she knew.

"Perhaps you, Captain Bensen, can explain it?" she said.

He gave a deprecatory shrug of the shoulders, shrugged the responsibility right off and on to us—to me, rather.

"The doing is not mine, Mrs. Galon," he said. "I'm under orders, too." A smile flickered for an instant about the corners of his mouth, and in that moment I decided that I did not altogether like the man.

"No?" she said with a quick, questioning lift in her voice. "Is that so?"

"It is," he said. "We are in the hands of the Guard."

In such a moment one can imagine all sorts of things, most of them without any foundation in fact at all. I thought, however, though probably I was mistaken, that a glance of understanding passed between them. Yet this in the light of his remarks about the lady the moment I questioned her identity, could not be so. He would hardly have hinted she was not all she seemed had there been any misunderstanding, however slight, between them.

"The Guard?" she repeated, and her eyes searched our stranger faces with greater curiosity. Her voice had sounded her relief; of its genuineness there was no possible doubt.

"At least in the hands of one representative of it," I said, and bowed.

She looked at me with a genuine interest she had not hitherto displayed. Her irritation at her detention appeared now to have vanished entirely; indeed it had gone so quickly that I was more than half convinced it had been assumed from the very first.

"Then. . ." she said. . . "then. . .", and there she stopped.

"Then," I prompted gently.

She made a slight movement as though the mental resolution she must have made had its physical reaction. "Then," she said very steadily, "I wasn't dreaming. It wasn't a nightmare. Only something serious, extremely serious, if the Guard is playing a part in it."

Mystifying, too much so in fact. Getting us nowhere at that. I made an abrupt movement of impatience.

"You saw something," I said sharply. "In those few minutes on the deck in your chair before you fell asleep, something happened. What was it?"

"If I said just what I saw, or rather what I fancy I saw, no one would believe me," she said a little fearfully. "I. . .I don't want my sanity questioned."

"No one will doubt you," I told her. "Listen to me, Mrs. Galon. I can tell you something that may help you. I can trust you to keep it to yourself, not breathe a word of it to the other passengers?"

"Of course," she said. "I won't say a word to a soul."

Frankly I did not believe her. I was certain that inside an hour it would be all over the ship. Not that it mattered much, not that it could do any harm. . .now. But thinking she was being taken into my confidence, believing that she would have the sole right of retailing every word I said to whomever cared to listen, she was almost certain to tell me without reservation everything she knew.

"This, then," I said slowly, "is not the only ship that has had a similar adventure. This, however, is the first ship I've boarded, and I'm not conversant with the exact details of what happened on the others. But from that you can rest assured that there are more things in space than we've yet charted, more things perhaps than we're ever likely to chart. However, it is my business to get to the bottom of this particular mystery, and if you can give me the slightest help the Service and I will forever be your debtor."

Flowery, you will say, and so I thought, and hated myself while saying it, but something told me she was of the type to whom such phrases were meat and drink. Out of the corner of one eye I saw Hume frowning. He was a straight, blunt man who preferred the straight, blunt ways. The pity of it is that they do not always work.

"Oh," she said. "We-ell, I don't know that there is much to tell, really. But what there is. . . ." She took a deep breath. "I was sitting in my chair on the deck just where you found me. Of a sudden I began to feel cold. I wondered if anything had happened to the heaters. I've heard of such things happening, though, of course, they don't occur nowadays. Then, I thought, perhaps I'd better go to my cabin for a wrap.

"I should have got up at that, risen to my feet, but, you know, I didn't because I couldn't. I tried. I'm sure of that. But it was as though I'd been completely paralyzed. I could not move a limb, not even a finger, only my eyes. Why they weren't paralyzed, too, I can't say. Then there was that feeling of intolerable cold and another feeling on top of it just as if I were sinking away into unconsciousness under an anesthetic. Not actually an unpleasant feeling at that.

"I think I must have been on the verge of going, for things seemed very misty before my eyes. Then the odd, startling thing happened that I'm still not sure wasn't something I dreamt. Two figures carrying someone came down the length of the deck. The person being carried, a limp, unconscious body, must have been Captain Bensen or one of the officers. I couldn't see the face, only the uniform.

"But it was the people, things, whatever you care to call them, that were carrying the body that. . .that made me think I was dreaming. Figures perhaps eight or nine feet high, higher than any Martian. Figures even isn't right. They weren't real, not tangible, isn't that the phrase? They seemed just like mist.

"Have you ever seen the sunlight on Earth of a hot day? You know how a beam of light seems to become visible, with little motes—

specks of dust, are they?—dancing in the middle of it. Well, that was just what these figures looked like, only not so clear, if you understand me. They were vaguer. Almost invisible, one might say.

"But the most horrifying thing about them was that I could see clean through them. As they passed, I could see the side of the deck and the quartzite windows, and even a star or two in the black void beyond, just as if they were transparent, made of glass themselves. It was horrible!"

Her voice faltered to a stop.

"Yes?" I said encouragingly. "And after that?"

"After that? Oh, I'm sorry. Well, after that I don't quite know what happened. Either I fainted right off or the lights went out: I don't know which. All I can say is that everything seemed to go dark. The next I remember is seeing you good folk round me."

(Illustration by Paul)

A procession of bodies was advancing along the deck, the bodies of those officers who should have been in the control room!

CHAPTER VII.

THE GUARD SHIP

SHE finished and looked expectantly from one to the other, as though she fancied we would treat her tale with derision. Yet there was nothing in it to laugh at, nothing at all impossible or outside the realm of scientific possibility. She had told her tale better than I had expected; she had shown a touch of the dramatic instinct, and a sense of detail. There was just one thing she seemed to have omitted.

"Can you describe the figures more closely?" I asked, but she shook her head.

"I'm afraid I can't. I saw only the vaguest outlines, and they, if you understand me, seemed to flicker. They weren't quite steady."

"As though a light, a faint light, were playing on them?" I suggested.

"Yes, that's just what it looked like," she said quickly. "How do you know?"

"I don't," I said smiling. "I merely guessed right, as it seems."

Truth to tell all the while she had been speaking one idea after another had been tumbling through my mind. Something about light and its refractive qualities, something about things being made invisible through the light beams being bent. I wasn't quite sure of it, but I had a book in my luggage on the *Cosmos*—one of the old print books—that dealt with problems of the kind. If my guess was right the puzzle of the space-visitors' invisibility was solved, though there still remained enough of other problems concerning them to make a man gray-headed.

"That's all right then, Mrs. Galon," I said the next instant. "We won't keep you any longer. Thank you very much for what you've told us. It will be a great help."

She smiled. "Do you really mean that?" she said challengingly.

"Most certainly," I said, and this time there could be no doubt of my sincerity.

"I'd better take her disks and prints," I said when she had gone.

The radio operator who had been with us all the time and whose business it was to attend to such matters turned to the little wall machine. A compact piece of mechanism that recorded every word that had been uttered and every gesture made in the room since the moment Mrs. Galon entered. It was so cleverly hidden that I doubt if any outsider would have suspected its existence.

It was more or less a development of the old sound film idea, and one not dreamt of by the general public since the so-called talking film had fallen on evil days with the advent of the televox-television machines. Nevertheless it was in pretty general use in space-ships, examining rooms and in all places where permanent records of statements were required.

The operator pushed a button placed in an inconspicuous part of the machine and a little panel slid back, revealing the cavity from which he took a roll of still dripping film, and three or four disks. The spoken word was recorded at the side of the film, of course, but since it was not always advisable or possible to run the film through when one wanted to consult it, the sound was also recorded on the disks rather after the style of the old gramophone records that one sees nowadays in museums.

"Be careful of that film," the operator said to me as he handed it over. "It's not quite dry yet. Perhaps I'd better dry it out for you."

"How long will it take?" I asked.

"Three to five minutes," he answered. "I'll have to go cannily, as I don't want the stuff to run."

"Go ahead," I answered. I could spare five minutes.

I saw Hume shift from one foot to the other, then glance nervously at his watch. It was evident he was getting impatient and wondering how much longer he was going to be held up. There is nothing these space captains like less than to have their schedule upset, and after all Hume had double grounds for irritation at the delay. This was in a sense a trial trip of the *Cosmos* and a good deal would depend on the time she made on the voyage. I tried to level things down as much as possible.

"It amounts to this, Captain Bensen," I said. "You've been boarded in mid-space, and subjected to a good deal of inconvenience and annoyance. On the other hand your cargo as shown by your indicators is intact, and nothing has been touched here in this cabin. It that a fair summing up?"

"More or less," Bensen agreed. "Except that you'd better record that there's nothing to show who our visitors were, or even that we had any at all."

"Only Mrs. Galon's statement," I cut in.

"Barely visible entities," he said, "things without form or substance."

I could have retorted that they at least had been able to carry him and his colleagues half the the length of the ship, but I did not. There was little to be gained by antagonising the man unnecessarily. Instead:

"I should imagine," I said mildly, "that it would be hard to explain what has happened in any other way."

"I think," said Bensen with almost my own intonation, "that you will find it hard to explain matters in that way."

What more he might have said I can only guess, for at that moment there came the low whine of the locator, a shutter on the wall of the cabin dropped, and a red bulb glowed to life.

The operator sprang to the television screen, connected the communicator, and with the receivers to his ears took the call. The plain surface of the vision plate suddenly brightened, but the operator's body screened it so that I could see only the warty tube projections on the tail-end of the ship that had signalled us.

I moved a little nearer, and at that the operator swung round.

"Interplanetary Guard-Ship *E. 22* calling," he said. "Wants to know what the trouble is."

The *E. 22*! My own Guard-Ship!

FOR the moment no one moved in the little control room. No one, I imagine, was anxious to shoulder the responsibility of any move.

"What shall I reply, sir?" the operator asked abruptly.

It was significant that he looked, not at me, but at his own captain.

Bensen flashed me a look. "It's for Mr. Sanders to say," he said dryly. "We're in his hands."

"If I may," I said, "I'd like to answer that call." I looked to Bensen for permission, a needless formality as we all knew, but it is ever my way not to ruffle a man's dignity more than is necessary.

"Go ahead," said Bensen gruffly. To the operator he added, "Mr. Sanders will tell you what to reply."

I moved nearer the machine, and the man glanced up at me enquiringly, his finger on the transmitting button.

"Do you mind," I said silkily, "if I send the message myself?"

He did not answer, but stepped aside with what I thought an ill grace. There is a certain close communion between these service operators that leads them to resent the intrusion of an outsider, more particularly when the latter has the power to ride rough-shod over them. I could understand his resentment, mild though it was, even sympathize with it. But as the innocent cause of it all I had my duty to do, and that to me was paramount.

I'll swear the change-over did not occupy more than a quarter of a minute, nevertheless it was long enough for the man on the *E. 22* to show impatience. Even as I fixed the ear-phones over my head the crackle-crackle of his signalled questions sounded in my ears.

"Don't be impatient," I signalled back, as fast as I could work the button with my finger. Then without giving the *E. 22's* people time to think up something snappy in return I changed over to the Guard-ship code. The vision screen beside me was now showing up their control room, just as ours must have been becoming visible to them.

A man was standing near the operator watching the screen that reflected the interior of our control room. I saw him start, peer at the surface of the vision plate, then a broad grin came over his fact. It was Glenn Vance, my relief. Recognition came to him almost at the moment it came to me.

Curious to think that, though we were separated by the gods knew how many miles, by virtue of the magic of the television screen we could look, as it were, into each other's face, and see the thoughts mirrored there. Had we been within the atmospheric envelope of any planet we could have spoken just as readily. However, for some reason that seems to elude our scientists the televox does not function in the void; it will carry the voice only where there is air.

I have never been able to understand why sound impulses cannot be sent across free space in the same way that our beam impulses can. There must be a reason, but I have never heard it given. Some day the difficulty may be overcome as worse difficulties have been overcome in the past; meanwhile when in space we rely for communications solely on our signal and television apparatus.

In this connection there is a story of two operators on two Guard-ships—brothers they were—who contrived to talk to each other without the aid of the power beam and all the cumbersome machinery of signals. Both brothers were experts in the sign language of the deaf and dumb, and needed only to see each other pictured in the vision plate of the television screen to hold an intelligible conversation. As a story it is no doubt apocryphal; nevertheless it is one of those things that deserve to be true even if they are not. But I digress.

I gave Vance an outline of the situation, told him why I was here, and waited for the suggestion I hoped he would make. It came without hesitation.

"Pity to interrupt your holiday," the reply clicked in my ear. "I'll take over if you wish and let you get on your way."

I signalled delighted agreement.

"Coming over at once," he signalled back. "Will clamp on to your vacant parts opposite side to the *Cosmos*."

The screen went blank and the crackle died in my ears. I turned to Bensen.

"The *E. 22* is coming over," I told him. "She'll connect up on your free side and her people will take over, probably escort you to the atmosphere's edge, if you wish."

Bensen nodded. "Good," he said. "Anything that will get us safely and quickly to our destination sounds good to me now. But you?"

"I'm going back to the *Cosmos* as soon as I've handed over," I said. "I'm no more anxious for delay than you are. Also I have Captain Hume's feelings to consider. I've upset his schedule enough as it is."

"Oh, don't worry about me," said Hume. "We're all in the hands of the Guard nowadays. It's the price we pay for safety and smooth-running."

I scented an undertone of smouldering sarcasm that might yet burst into flame; I knew that he had it in his mind to add that scarcely a voyage passed without the Guards having to hold up the ship. Of course the safety of his craft and his passengers had probably depended on the Guards' action, but there is no use pointing out that to a potentially irritable man. Bensen, I felt, would probably sympathize with him if it came to a matter of argument, might even find a grievance for himself arising out of my supersession of his operator.

I was saved from saying something that might have led to an exchange of remarks for which we would all be sorry a moment later, by the glow of the warning bulbs advising us the *E. 22* was connecting and would want the port opened on signal. It came a second later, a dull buzzing that filled the room.

Bensen gave the order to open the starboard port. It would have been just as easy for the *E. 22's* people to have opened it by the manual locks from outside as we had done on boarding, but then they knew this was a live ship and under control, whereas we had believed her a derelict.

Circumstances alter cases, and after all these little niceties of courtesy are not all empty conventions.

Came first the clump of feet up the ladder, then the smiling face of Glenn Vance appeared.

"So it's really you, Jack, in trouble as usual," was his greeting as he gained level flooring and came towards me.

"The only trouble I'm in is that of delay," I said a little sharply. I was not in quite the mood for bantering, anxious as all were to be on our way. "The sooner you can take over and let us be off the better we'll be pleased."

"So?" he said agreeably. "Well, tell me what it's all about, and you can hand over at once."

He had already had my résumé over the power beam and it only needed filling in. He seemed to find the matter vastly interesting, and did not appear altogether surprised at it. At I learnt presently Harran had sent him a flash, an all-ships call, setting out the situation in outline.

Thereafter we speeded things up as much as possible, and in a little less than ten minutes from the time Vance had arrived, Hume and I and our people were making our way back to the *Cosmos*. As I turned to go I put my hand in my pocket and drew out the compact little packet of film and disks.

"You'd better take these," I said to my colleague. "Mrs. Galon's statement."

"Good. They'll do as a check. Everyone, of course, will be examined again at London Landing. It'll be interesting to see how close she keeps to her original statement. Well, good-bye and a good journey. I wouldn't change with you anyway. I'm in the thick of it here, trying to unravel this mystery, while you. . . ."

He stopped significantly.

"While I," I said, "am right out of it, leading a calm and placid existence."

"Vegetating for the duration," he laughed. "Well, you'll hear all about it when you get back to duty, and probably will want to kick yourself for being out of the climax of the most interesting investigation in years."

"Probably," I agreed.

If I—if he—had only known!

We got back to the *Cosmos*, found her still the same silent ship, sleep-wrapped save for the duty watch; closed our port, and signalled our imminent departure to the others.

Slowly we slid away from the bulk of the *M. E.* 75, then as the rolgar engines began to take hold and the phosphorescent glare to drift from our reaction tubes we gathered speed and shot ahead. The *M. E.* 75 with the Guard-ship now unbuckled and hovering close by her, receded behind us remotely into space.

CHAPTER VIII

"A Martian Girl Seeking Knowledge. . . ."

I SLEPT late. The buzz of the breakfast call did not wake me. I knew nothing until the steward at the door filled my cabin with the grotesque wailing of the sounder. I came to with a start, dimly realizing what had happened.

After our adventure in mid-space and our return to the *Cosmos* I had tumbled into bed, dog-tired. I had locked my door against intrusion, but had forgotten everything beyond that. Since I had slept beyond the normal, and not answered the breakfast call, and there was no indication in my message grid beside the door of the time I wished to be called, my steward had not unnaturally concluded that something was wrong. As a preliminary to forcing entry he had given an emergency call on the sounder.

I sprang out of bed the moment the wailing started, and made shift to open my door. Had I not done so, had I altogether ignored the noise of the sounder, the electric control that locked the cabin would have been thrown out of gear at the control board, and entrance, in the nature of an investigation, would have been made into the cabin. Oddly enough it is not at all unusual on such trips to find neurotic, depressed or nerve-strained people locking themselves in their cabins, and taking some form or other of euthanasia.

Not very pleasant for the other passengers, for no sight in the Universe can be so weirdly depressing as a burial in space. . . . From this, however, you can understand how the fact of a passenger failing to answer a call spreads uneasiness, if not alarm, through the ship.

I released the switch and flung open the door. My steward's face showed relief when I appeared.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sanders," he said, awkwardly apologetic, "but when you didn't appear for breakfast and there was no message in your grid, I though. . . ."

"You did quite right," I told him. "My fault entirely. I tumbled in tired last night. Never dreaming I'd over-sleep the breakfast call I left no message. I'll be more careful next time. What's the hour now?"

"Ten a. m. Earth Western time," he told me. "We'll change over to Martian time at midnight tonight. We're working up to velocity now."

That was news to me, good news in a way, for it showed our trip would be over sooner than I thought. I might have guessed it had I awoke sooner, for the fabric of the vessel quivered slightly to the soft yet steady pulse of the rolgar engines. Not often are they used in free space, save to take off or slow down. Evidently Hume had decided we had wasted enough time over the unscheduled stop last night, and was using the engines to work up to a velocity where our impetus would carry us on past the neutral point of gravity.

The steward lingered. "If you like . . . . if you want something to eat now, I think I can manage it," he said hesitantly.

Looking out for an extra tip no doubt, the rascal. Well, it didn't matter much. He'd looked after me well to date, and I could do with something to eat and drink. The night call on my strength—amazing how those emergency suits take it out of one—had left me famished.

"Get what you can as soon as you like, and bring it here," I told the man, and with that dismissed him.

I made ready while he was away. A certain giddiness that I did not like attacked me from time to time as I moved about. It was nothing

much when all was said and done. Nevertheless it worried me. In some ways it was akin to space vertigo, an affliction I dreaded, for it would mean the end of my career in the Service. In all my eleven years in the Interplanetary Guardships I had not been troubled by it and so concluded I was immune. It would be a pity now if after all that time the attacks should come on.*

The trouble passed away, however, by the time my tray arrived. Probably it was no more than momentary weakness engendered by the exertion and the tenseness of the night. The fact that it left me completely, once I had made my meal, seemed to satisfy me on that point.

A knock came to the door just as I was putting the finishing touches to my toilet before venturing out. Thinking it was my steward coming back for the empty tray, I called, "Come in".

The door opened, but it was another steward, a man whose face I had not seen before. He had a message from Hume, it appeared. The skipper was inquiring after me. If I was up he would like a word with me, if not he wished to know how I was.

A graceful gesture, I thought. "T'll come along and see him," I said. "Where is he? In the control-room?"

In the cabin, in bed, the steward told me. That was rather a surprise. It set me wondering, wondering if there were any connection between my recent giddiness and Hume's indisposition.

Hume was sitting propped up in his bed when I entered. He looked a little grey, I imagined. He did not speak until I had closed the door and we were left alone.

"Glad to see you about, Jack," he said then. "I was beginning to wonder."

"Wonder what?" I asked. "What's wrong with you, anyway?"

HE made a wry face. "I thought it was space vertigo when it came on," he said. "I was up before the breakfast call, not much sleep naturally, seeing what we were at during the night. But when I tried to move about, the cabin started spinning round me."

"That's bad. And then?"

"I won't bore you with my symptoms. I got a scare, however, began to imagine space vertigo was seizing me, saw my career snapping off short, and all that helped to make me worse, I suppose. However, the long and short of it is that Dr. Spence came down, tested my reflexes, and decided it wasn't space vertigo after all."

"No? Listen, Hume, I had a somewhat similar experience this morning myself." I gave him details. "What do you make of that?" I asked.

"What Dr. Spence thinks is that we got out of our emergency suits too soon last night. There must have been something in the air of *M. E.* 75, something other than the cold, an ingredient with a slightly anesthetizing property. We're feeling the after-kick of it now. It's got into our systems and is acting according to our various resistances and the length of time we were exposed to it. Seems that it's something that seeps through the insulation of those emergency suits too. Spence and the two members of the crew with us merely complained of a slight lassitude; I got the full kick of it, while you overslept this morning, and so probably gave time for the worst of it to wear off."

"That's about the size of it, I should imagine," I agreed. His explanation seemed quite reasonable. The one of us with least sleep and most exertion had been the one to feel the worst effect.

"What's Spence ordered you to do?" I went on.

"Stay in till I'm better," Hume smiled. "I'm feeling that way already, and—if you don't mind—we'll have the complete cure in a moment or two.

"Oxcta," he went on. "You'll find the box in that drawer. The lock's a simple switch one. The white button breaks the circuit, the red one opens it."

I did as he told me, and drew out the little steel box I had seen my first evening on board, and handed it to him.

"Now the water," Hume said.

When I handed him the glass, "I'm glad you were able to come," he said. "I wouldn't risk getting out for the things myself—that's how I feel, you can see—and I've no mind to let others into my secrets. People blab and if the whisper got out that I drugged, I couldn't very well contradict it without revealing just exactly what it was I took. And that I wouldn't do, except to an odd one like yourself whom I trust implicitly."

"I needed that," he said, as he swallowed the last of the draught. Then he eyed me. "I've been thinking of myself solely. You need a taste of it, too. Draw yourself a glass."

I did and mixed it under his supervision, drank the stuff, and felt immeasurably the better for it. I said so. He did not answer, merely nodded, and still eyed me, a trifle more thoughtfully now.

"Jack," he said, "I've been thinking. Last night put a fancy or two into my head—came, I mean, while I've been lying here and thinking. Yours isn't altogether a pleasant job, though, no doubt, it has its romantic side. Still you may get into tighter corners than I'm ever likely to. Corners of the sort we were both in last night."

What was coming, I wondered, as he paused. Something momentous?

"A few of these on hand"—he held out a dozen of the Oxcta pellets to me—"might be valuable. Only, I must ask you never to say that you have them in your possession, never indeed acknowledge that you know of their existence. I shouldn't do any such thing; I've never been expressly asked not to, you understand, though I've always felt there's been an implied prohibition."

"In that case," I said, not taking the pellets, "perhaps you shouldn't offer them."

"A time may come when you'll be glad I did. You've seen their effect on me; you've felt it—twice—on yourself. Here, take them. Call it humoring me, if you like."

"All right, since you're so pressing. And after all they are handy things to have about, par-

*Space vertigo, a species of giddiness akin to mountain or air sickness, that occasionally attacks interplanetary travellers. While comparatively harmless in the opening stages, if not checked immediately it exercises a disposition to suicide.

ticularly as they aren't drugs in the ordinary sense."

"They aren't. Only keep them in a metal box, steel for preference. You've got one you can use? No. Well, you'll find an empty one in the same drawer. It's Earth-made, so there's nothing to connect *it* up with *them*."

I FOUND the box, and transferred to it the dozen pellets he had given me. A lot of fuss to make about them. After all, if his assurances were to be believed, as I felt they were, they were no more than a remarkable tonic whose constituents were kept a close secret by the Martian manufacturers. A little thing seemingly. Yet had it not been for those tiny pellets my life might have run on altogether different lines. A pity if it had, for I would have missed much of the fullness of things. . . .

The box slid into my pocket. . . .

"As far as we are concerned," said Hume a trifle anxiously, "I take it that last night's affair is over and done with."

We still kept to the old Earth style of dividing the day into periods of darkness and light, though here there was neither day nor night. We saw only the blackness of space with the stars and the planets doubly bright, doubly brilliant with the absence of air. The arbitrary arrangement of time was marked only by the clock. Still it was a convenient arrangement, and we stuck to it in lieu of something better.

"The Guard-ship's taken over," I pointed out. "That should end it as far as this voyage goes. But seeing Mars and Venus have reported more or less similar experiences, there may be enquiries at Tlanan when we reach there. It depends on what the Martian authorities think."

"At any rate we won't have our schedule upset," Hume remarked.

"I shouldn't think so. In a day or so we'll pass the beat of the last of the Earth Guard-ships, and the Martian ones, I'd imagine, would be more interested in speeding us towards Tlanan for an enquiry than in hanging us up in mid-space."

"I hope so." He did not seem so sure of that. Perhaps he knew the Martians better than I; perhaps it was merely that his imagination was conjuring up visions of unpleasant, possible delays. Which, it was hard to say.

A moment's silence, then:

"Well, Jack, if you don't mind clearing out, I'd like to get up," he said. "I'm feeling fit to face things again, now that I know it isn't space vertigo coming on. Also the Oxcta has made a new man of me. By the way, use the stuff sparingly. It will lose its effect if you take it too often."

"Never fear. I don't like forming habits, good, bad or indifferent," I told him. With that and a nod I left him.

There were many things to think about. Free though I was of the necessity of probing further the particular mystery of *M. E.* 75 I was still interested deeply. Here was a mystery doubly intriguing. It seemed to defy solution, yet ever and again I had a queer feeling that I was very close to a revelation. I might be deluding myself—the wish father to the thought—though most probably it was that I had not yet completely rid my system of the stuff that had produced that anesthetic cold.

It was not unlikely that contact with my fellow beings might not only clear my befogged brain, but perhaps set it working along new lines. There is always a certain stimulus in companionship. At any rate I was more likely to puzzle uncertainly over everything if I kept to my cabin. I made my way to the promenade deck.

For some reason or other there were few about at that hour. My chair had already been marked out for me, though so far I had made no use of it. Now I found it without difficulty, dropped into it and began to fill my pipe. That alone of Earth's vices was left me for comfort. The Martians and the Venusians for some queer reason regard our Tellurian habit of smoking as rather laughable, though of late some of the more advanced of both planets are adopting the practice.

I felt drowsy. I believe I must have dozed, for next I remember was a voice in my ear, musical, resonant. I opened my eyes with a start. Jansca Dirka was standing beside me, smiling.

I jerked upright in my chair, and began some remark about having dropped off to sleep.

The merriment died from her eyes, her face became grave of an instant. How attractive she looked, I thought; hard to decide whether I preferred her more gay or serious. Either way she was infinitely charming.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said in a voice that held just the faintest trace of her native accent. Her tendency to labor each particular syllable equally would, however, have betrayed her Martian origin. "I had no idea you were dozing," she ran on. "I wouldn't have disturbed you had I known."

I drew up a vacant chair beside me. "Sit here," I invited her. I did not quite believe her statement that she did not know I was dozing. She was not quite so foolish as all that. Patently she wanted to talk with me. Well, let her make the running. Who knew but that something of interest might yet come out in conversation.

She seated herself, and half-turned towards me. "You do not mind?" she said as though asking permission for what she had yet to say.

"Go ahead," I said amusedly. "I can see you want to ask questions. What is it now?"

Her eyebrows lifted a little, archly. "Nothing much, nothing of any importance. I am merely a Martian girl seeking knowledge. . . ."

"In that case I'll be happy to tell you anything I can, providing I can."

Her eyes sparked up at that. Was it, I asked myself, that she read into my last three words a meaning other than that which appeared on the surface? If so, she showed no other sign of it.

"I have been reading," she went on gently, "delving into the ship's library of your Earth books. Somehow I prefer them to the book-machines. They are more restful, more convenient to carry about. They are not noisy. One can read them and at the same time maintain privacy without the need of sound insulators."

"I'm glad you like them," I said simply. "I, too, have a leaning towards the old print. In

many ways I like the old ideas. The book machines seem to lack something. Yet we took them from you."

SHE frowned. "From Mars," she said thoughtfully, using the Earth title for her planet. "Well, not all that comes from us is good." She stopped abruptly, thinking perhaps as I imagine of that disastrous War of the Planets that came near wrecking the civilizations of the Inner Planets.*

Abruptly she pulled herself back to the point of origin of the conversation, yet actually she had not strayed so far from it after all.

"I found amongst those books an old one by an Earth-man named Wells—'The War of the Worlds'," she said slowly. "I thought at first it was an actual history, then I discovered as I read that it was what you call. . . ." She hesitated, looking to me to supply the elusive word.

"A romance?" said I.

"An imaginative romance," she qualified. "I read on and on. Tell me was Earth like that? Did men drive animals about?"

"As a picture of those times I fancy it is pretty accurate," I said. "That is, of course, if you leave out the invasion part of it."

She shuddered. "To think that Earth-men once imagined we might assume those shapes—the things that came in the cylinders. Octopus shapes. Loathsome things." Then quickly before I could comment, she ran on. "Yet it was you Earth-people who first reached out into space, who first of all voyaged to the distant planets."

"I've often wondered about that," I said. "Time and time again it has puzzled me why neither your people nor the Venusians branched out in that way."

"There were many reasons," she told me. "You are a predatory folk, an exploring, restless race. Also you had certain things we lacked. We could fly, but we had not that urge to reach out for the stars that is your heritage."

Yet in this she was not quite accurate. Interplanetary travel would never have become the accomplished fact it is today had it not been for the discovery of Rolgar. True, we found it on the Moon, in our own territory, so to speak, though we did not immediately realize its significance. As every student of history knows the first flights which took us no further than the Moon were made by means of a development of the Goddard Rocket; they were expensive and unreliable, and on an average one in every four met with tragedy.

Even with the improvements Leyton-Browne introduced in 1975, and which enabled our space explorers to extend the radius of their travels, interstellar voyages could not have become a commercial proposition. It was only when we made contact with the Venusians and learnt from them the true value of rolgar that we began to progress at all.

It is odd to recall that to the Venusians Rolgar was practically a theoretical substance, one as rare, if not rarer, to them than radium is on Earth. The Earth, ignorant of its value and its almost incalculable powers, possessed on our Moon a practically unlimited supply. Sad to think that it was over that too, that the first, and, we hope, the last of the interplanetary wars was fought. . . .

"Do you think then"—I switched back to the immediate subject—"that there would never have been communication between us had it not been for our Earth-folk?"

She looked at me then, not squarely, but with a quick glance shot from under her veiling, eyelashes.

"Do you?" she said, and for the moment I failed to realize that the question was merely rhetorical. I was about to answer when she went on, "Do you ever pause to think, perhaps wonder, Mr. Sanders, whether somewhere in the Universe there may not be others, intelligent beings, like us in form, immeasurably our superiors in intellect, who may even now be reaching out to contact with us? One hears strange stories."

I stared at her. What she was saying ran so close to the ideas in my own mind, paralleled so nearly my own recent experiences that I asked myself was she throwing out feelers. A Martian girl seeking knowledge. . . . Was this the particular knowledge she was seeking, word of the mystery that was even then puzzling me?

I LOOKED again to meet her eyes, frank this time, yet questioning, with all a child's frankness. Yet with behind it all, vaguely, that baffling something that is symptomatic of the Martian mind. And in a flash it came to me.

"You know it!" I said. I might have phrased it otherwise, have said, "You've guessed!" But I used instinctively the one word that accurately summed up the situation. She knew, but how much she knew I had yet to learn.

"I know," she said, this Martian maiden seeking knowledge, and her hand dropped comfortingly on mine. "I know. Indeed I am aware of more about you than perhaps you think. You see, you have interested me—us. My father and I."

She did not take her hand away. A moment later she could not even had she wished, for I had prisoned it in mine.

"You know," I said challengingly. "But how much, after all, do you know?"

She laughed softly. "Much. Enough to startle you," she told me. "That you are no private tourist, that you hold a high position in Earth's Guard-ship Fleet."

"That could be guessed," I said. "It could have been found out quite easily. I am not unknown. It is quite possible that many travellers on the space-liners should have seen me in an official capacity, and have remembered."

"That is so," she agreed. "As you say such a discovery, though annoying, is of little or no importance. But do not worry. If you wish to preserve your secret it is safe with us. Save my father and I, none on this ship but those you have confided in shall know exactly who you are. But, as you say, that is a little thing, no sure test of the knowledge I boasted I possessed.

*The War of the Planets took place in 1900. A history of this is in course of preparation.

"But—she leaned a little closer to me, so close that I could have taken her in my arms without an effort had I wished and had I been that sort of man—"but suppose"—her voice dropped to a whisper that could be heard by none but me—"suppose I were to tell you what else I know, of the things that have worried you and threatened to upset your holiday, of—this will startle you—the events of last night, of the ship adrift in space, and the sleeping, half-frozen men you found there. Supposing I told you all this what would you say?"

"That there has been a leakage somewhere," I said promptly, "that someone has talked."

She nodded. "You could explain it so," she agreed. "But what you could not explain by that or any other form of reason is this, a thing known to you alone, that in this pocket"—she tapped it lightly—"you have a little steel box containing twelve pellets of Martian Oxcta."

I stared at her stupefied. Only Hume knew I had those tiny pellets in that box, but even Hume did not know into which pocket I had slipped them. It had happened, more by accident than design, that he had not seen.

Knowing this, what else was there she might not know, strange, dark secrets, perhaps better left unrevealed?

CHAPTER IX

"A Friend, or Perhaps a Little More. . . ."

I STARED at her stupefied—as I have written—while the unrecoverable seconds ticked remorselessly away. I scarcely knew what to say or with what counter to meet this frank revelation. The fact that she knew something and no doubt guessed more of the mystery in which I had played my little part did not matter so much; it was the uncanny knowledge she displayed of something trifling in itself, yet about which no one but myself should know anything, that was so disconcerting.

For the moment I fancied I had the solution of the puzzle in my grasp, that she had seen the outline of the box showing through my coat, and had deduced the rest. But I had no sooner formed the idea than I saw it could not be. The box itself did not show through the material of my coat; even had it done so she could not have reasoned its nature and contents—even the exact number of pellets—so surely. No, the true explanation was a less obvious, more uncanny one than that.

The light in her eyes changed to something softer than a mere smile, a touch of commiseration, I fancied crept into it. In a way it roused me from my momentary stupor.

"Tell me," I demanded, still in the same soft whisper she herself had used, "tell me how you know all this. It's. . . ." In my turn I halted for a word, and this time it was she who supplied the needed one.

"Uncanny" she suggested, and when I nodded, "No, Mr. Sanders, it isn't. It's anything but that. To show you what I mean I'll tell you something more. Wait a moment, please."

She thrust her hand through the V opening at the bosom of her dress, held her hand there under the shadow of the material almost as though she held something in her palm, something at which she looked and frowned a little, with a drawing together of those fine eyebrows of hers.

"Face me squarely," she commanded. "Ah, that is it. Now. Under the left lapel of your coat, where you can show it in a moment if necessary, is your interplanetary badge, a silver badge in the shape of a spaceship with the letters —English letters—'I. P. G.' spread along its length."

"Go on," I said with interest. So much she could have told me from memory if she had ever —as no doubt she had—seen a Guard's badge before.

She did not look up, but: "You're still a little doubtful," she whispered. "We-ell—. On the back of the badge is a number—725. Beneath the number are the two letters 'S. C.'."

She could not have known without having seen my badge—which I swear she had never done—could not possibly have known that I was numbered '725' of the Interplanetary Guard, and that my rank was 'Space Captain'. It savored of witch-craft.

She went on calmly, coolly. "In your right-hand coat pocket you have an envelope, buff in color. It contains a space radio form. The message on the form is written in an Earth-language I do not know. It is not one in use, that is all I can say. But I can spell out the words to you." She did, she spelled it through until I thought it time to call a halt, for I had no mind that Harran's last message to me should get this sort of publication.

"Please, please," I said almost breathlessly. "Don't go any further. I'm convinced."

She looked up mischievously at me. Her hand came out of the bosom of her dress, empty, as it had gone in. Yet I could swear that the moment she raised her eyes to meet mine I heard a slight click as of a spring being released.

"And of what are you convinced?" she whispered.

"Of the reality of what you're saying—or doing," I told her. "But it's magic, witchcraft."

"No. No. Applied science, that's all. You Earthlings beat us Martians in many ways. You are our masters in most things, in space-travelling, not the least. But here and now in one thing and another we can still teach you a little. You have seen what I can do—I, a Martian girl, and not a clever one. A little toy it is, yet how it shakes you, saps your confidence and makes you talk of magic, of witchcraft, of things no sane planetarian really believes in these enlightened days."

"Tell me," I said quickly, for I thought I saw some method in her madness, "why do you do this thing? I am sure it is not merely that you want to puzzle me."

Again she bent a little nearer, again the voice sank to a low caressing whisper.

"It is," she said, "because I want to help you, because I may be able if only in my small way, to aid you a little."

"With that little toy? What is it? May I see it?"

She took my questions in order. "Yes, with that little toy, as you call it. It is worked on the principle of your X-rays, something analogous, at any rate. But it can see through anything, and strangely enough the form and substance—the color of the thing seen through—are not blurred and lost as happens with certain substances viewed under your X-rays. You wish to see it? I cannot show it to you here. There may be prying eyes about, people who would not approve."

SHE flung a swift glance about the deck. No one seemed in the least interested in our talk, but then that was nothing to go by. Men—women, too— can watch and listen without showing the slightest outward sign of interest.

"Mr. Sanders, you are Earth-born. You have conventions that are not ours; we have conventions that possibly you do not understand. Would you therefore think it a thing that should not have been said if I were to ask you to come down to the seclusion of my cabin where we can talk undisturbed?"

My hesitation was but for the moment, only the drag of an old Earth-convention, as she had hinted, pulling at me. To hold it longer in my mind was in a way an insult to her.

"No, of course not," I said readily.

"Well, leave me now," she said. "My cabin is C-8. In ten minutes you will find me there. We had better not go together."

There was wisdom in her suggestion. With a brightly-flung word and a cheery nod for the benefit of anyone who might chance to be watching, I rose to my feet, sauntered off along the deck, stopped to re-light my pipe, strolled through the saloon, moving aimlessly until I came to the notice board. There I halted to read the bulletins of news. Nothing startling from any of the three planets, no mention certainly of any space-ships in trouble. It occurred to me to wonder if by any chance news on that matter were being censored. Most probably it was. The Board would not run the risk of panic if it could be avoided.

So casually I made my way to the accommodation deck, and presently located C-8. The glow of a light tube streaming through the grille over the door told me it was in occupancy. I glanced at the name grid. "Jansca Dirka", that was all. She then had the whole cabin space to herself. We had not a very full ship that trip.

I knocked. The door opened a space. She saw me, opened it further, and without a word, beckoned me in.

She closed the door behind me, snapped the switch, and closed the sound insulators. Then she turned to me with a smile.

"Why," I said, "are you doing all this, as you say, to help me?"

"Because," she said, "I would be your friend."

"A friend, or perhaps a little more," I said softly, overwhelmed by that other-world intoxication of her presence, that lure that was not Earth's. I had her hands in mine as I spoke. She said nothing, did not even look at me, but I felt them drawn softly away.

"We can," she said with meaning, "speak of such matters after. There are more important things to talk of now."

She turned swiftly away from me for a moment. What she did or where it came from I could not say, but when she faced me the next second in the palm of her outstretched hand there lay glistening a watch-like thing with a tiny thread-thin chain attached.

"Take it," she said. "It is yours. It will help you."

I took the thing. It was shaped like a watch, as I have said, save that back and front were made of some vitreous substance, neither glass nor quartzite. As I looked into one crystal face I could see nothing, but the girl leaned over, touched a spring I had not noticed before. I nearly let it drop, for the floor of the cabin under the crystal face seemed to vanish, and I found myself looking into the deck below, seeing everything beneath me as clearly as though the floor were made of glass.

She laughed softly at the amazement in my face.

"It is rather startling when one sees it for the first time," she said, "but as I've told you the principle underlying it is quite simple. It is merely a matter of penetrative rays. You Earthlings have progressed somewhat on the road, with your discoveries of X-rays, gamma rays, and the rest. Perhaps some day you will discover this also for yourselves."

"It is rather astounding," I said as soon as I recovered my composure. "You don't know then how the principle is applied?"

I asked merely from curiosity, though I realized the moment I had spoken that it was a question that should never have been put.

Slowly, seriously she shook her head. "I do not know," she said deliberately, "and if I did I would not tell. I am giving you this little instrument because I know it will help you, but not even for you would I betray the secrets of my people."

I turned on her, suddenly stricken contrite. "Of course!" I said. "You are doing a wonderful thing even in giving me this. I should not have asked you any such question. But it slipped out. Human curiosity."

She waved that aside, came a little closer, and as though afraid that even in that sound-proof cabin she might be overheard she dropped her voice to the merest thin thread of a whisper.

"Keep it there," she said, pointing. "On the inside of your buttoned jacket. Make a pocket for it there, to keep it hidden out of sight. You have only to put your hand down—you need never pull it out more than is necessary—for you to see the dial face on one side or the other. Its rays will penetrate through almost any substance, but you must never, never breathe a word that will indicate you have it in your possession."

"YOUR father. . . . ?" I suggested.

"He does not know," she said quickly. "I do not want him to know. He is well-disposed towards you, friendly, as who would not be? But even he, if he knew that I was even to this extent betraying a Martian secret to one not of

our race by blood or by adoption, would be harsh with me. . . ."

Her voice trailed into silence, leaving me with the impression that she had not said all that was in her mind.

"Tell me," I said quickly, "if this were known —what would happen to you? Anything dire?"

(Illustration by Paul)

The huge ship stretched out like an overtilled balloon and burst into myriad fragments.

She did not answer me, but the droop of her head told me all I wished to know. This Martian maiden, in so many ways like an Earth girl, in so many other ways unlike, was for me taking the stars knew what risks.

"Tell me, tell me," I begged. "I would not have anything—any gift such as this—at the price of suffering to you. Is it merely that I am an alien, because I have no Sonjhon blood in me that you would be punished?"

In my eagerness, anxiety, call it what you will, I had stumbled into using the Martian word itself, and at the sound of it she looked up, as I thought, startled.

"Yes," she said slowly, thoughtfully, "yes, it is because you have no Sonjhon blood in you that I must fear for myself."

For a space she paused, her eyes searching me, weighing me. Then . . . .

I saw the glitter of the little knife in her hand, and I sprang forward, but she thrust me back with one hand, and for once I was not minded to use force.

"Stay," she said fiercely. "I mean no harm to you or anyone else. But I see a way."

Something in her eyes compelled me to wait. There was resolution in her looks, yet such that I no longer felt anxiety or fear, only a great wonder.

She took the little knife, a vicious sharp thing, held it down near the point, made a tiny scratch in the fleshy part of her left arm, and waited until the red blood came. I waited, doubting what this meant, yet in a vague way feeling that I knew.

Suddenly she thrust the arm towards me, and spoke commandingly. .

"See," she said, "I have drawn blood. With your lips remove it."

I must have involuntarily recoiled then. To my mind there was something barbaric about it all.

"Don't waste time," she said sharply. "Do as I tell you."

She came of a long line of those born to rule this girl; there was something of their concentrated magnetism in her, something, too, that was all her own. Scarcely knowing what I did, my head whirled so I obeyed her. My lips touched her warm flesh.

She drew her arm away, and as I straightened up, looked at me with a new light in her eyes.

"You are one of us," she said with a strange dignity and a stranger softness in her manner. "Now you can always say with truth that you are of the Sonjhon blood, for you have that blood, my blood in you."

Then it was the meaning of it all dawned on me. It was no barbaric rite, no ancient survival of blood brotherhood such as once existed amongst certain peoples on Earth; it was her way, the only way she knew, of giving me power to claim, if necessary, the rights by blood of a citizen of Mars.

The deed, as much as the thought behind it, amazed me. I knew enough of her planet's customs to realize that it would hold as binding in any Martian community, but whether it had any deeper implication, of course, I could not say. Perhaps I should have felt revulsion; I do not know; all I can say is that I did not.

Our eyes met; she stepped back a pace, drew a long breath, and slid the tiny knife into a sheath at her girdle. Then:

"I had better explain," she said in studied calm tones, "the working of the—." She used a word I did not catch, most probably it was a Martian phrase new to me. She smiled at my puzzled expression. "That little instrument I gave you," she explained, but I noticed that she did not speak its name again, and I did not ask her, for reasons which were perhaps wise.

I took the thing from my pocket—for lack of a better name I called it in my own mind 'The Crystal Eye', and as such it will be referred to hereafter—and handed it to her. She showed me that the spring at the top was in reality a sort of screw; it could be adjusted to suit the distance in much the same way that one adjusts binoculars. She made absolutely certain that I thoroughly understood its workings before she allowed me to return it to its hiding-place.

"Tell me one thing before I go," I said, for it was a thought that worried me. "Do all Martians carry these?"

She eyed me as though she fancied there might be more behind the question than actually appeared.

"No," she said slowly, "no. Only those of. . . . Only a favored few carry them."

I read in her eyes the meaning of that hesitation, could almost hear the word she had left unsaid. I knew without a doubt that she had meant to say "Only those of the blood," and had pulled herself up just in time. Well, it seemed —if suppressions and hesitations went for anything—that now it was a matter not to be referred to between us again.

It had come to this that now I must make some sort of graceful retreat. Having uttered my thanks—which she cut short, a little indignantly, I thought—I was looking for some excuse when I chanced to look up again, and see her eyes.

I saw in them, what I had never expected to see in woman's eyes looking into mine, be she of Earth or any other planet—tears, diamond-bright, glistening like dew-drops in the morning sun. Eyes, dear eyes, whose very glance plucked the soul from me, drew me out of myself as the magnet draws the steel.

Blindly I made a step forward, fumbled, caught her in my arms, I kissed the lips that for the moment feigned resistance, then clung passionately to mine.

. . .I released her, but it was not the Jansca I had caught in my arms. It was another being, glorious, ethereal, one who looked at me with something in her eyes that thrilled me to the very root and marrow of my being.

"Jansca," I said, stumblingly, haltingly, "can it really be?"

"It is," she said simply. "It is and always will be so. Nothing now can take us from each other."

Who or what, thought I in my ignorance, was there to try such a thing?

CHAPTER X.

I Take Over

THROUGHOUT most of that day the ether must have been super-heated with the messages that were coming and going between worlds. And in the administrative centers of the three confederated planets wild-eyed men must have been working feverishly, preparing to deal with a menace whose actual purpose, whose identity even, had not yet become manifest.

To us sealed up in our space-ship hurtling through the void to our destination nothing of this was known, and it was not until the dinner hour that night that the first repercussions of the trouble became apparent.

Supremely happy in my new-found love I had taken my seat at the table, to meet the ardent glance from Jansca's glowing eyes, and the approving look from her father, whom I had already seen and talked with. I noticed as a thing of little moment that Hume's place was unoccupied; his hours were irregular compared with

ours, and I was no more surprised to find him absent than I would have been to see him present.

Jansca leaned across the table and said something to me. What is was I cannot say at this distance of time, some chance remark, no doubt. The first course—I remember principally because I had to go without it—was in process of being served. I was about to make some light answer to Jansca's remark, when a finger touched me on the shoulder, and I heard my name spoken. I turned. It was one of the officers.

"Captain Hume would like to see you at once, Mr. Sanders," he said. There was a serious note in his voice that was not in the least encouraging.

"At once?" I echoed. "Won't it do when I've finished dinner?"

The other shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Captain Hume was insistent that I should bring you back with me, even if it meant foregoing dinner." All this in so low a voice that it impinged on my ear alone.

"Oh, well"—I shrugged my shoulders—"I suppose I'll have to go."

I faced Jansca and she leaned across to catch my words. "My dear," I said, "I'm afraid I'll have to leave my dinner untasted. I'm wanted. Apparently urgently."

"Go," she said swiftly. "Don't wait. I think I understand." Her hand, reaching across the table, caught mine and give it a gentle pressure.

I met her eyes. There was something in them that startled me. Agony, fear, anxiety: all somehow mixed together. A moment, and they faded to yield to a tenderness that no words can possibly describe. One look flung between us, heart talking silently to heart. Then I rose to my feet and swung off behind the man who had summoned me. At the saloon door I caught up to him and asked the inevitable question.

He did not know, he said, what was behind the call. Possibly, even had he known he would not have told me. Mystery was deepening on our ship, secrecy becoming the order of the day.

Hume sat before a desk littered with papers, and he raised a grave face to meet my glance as I was ushered in.

"Sit down there, Jack, opposite me," was his greeting. Then to the officer who had conducted me, "Insulate us against all outside interference," he said, and did not speak again until the switch clicked over and the warning lights inside the door showed that we were secure from eavesdroppers.

"Man, what is it?" I cried. "What's gone wrong now that you look so grave?"

His brow furrowed into lines. "Jack," he said earnestly, "I'd give a lot to be able to answer that question of yours. But perhaps this may tell you something."

He pushed a message form to me. It was written in plain English and it had been sent out from New York headquarters of the Earth division of the Interplanetary Board of Control not two hours before.

I stared at it, for it began with the triple call of urgency, that call we seldom get more than once in a generation. The message was a long one, covering three sheets of closely written lines, but the gist of it can be given in a sentence. It was a general call to all Space Ships to rendezvous at the nearest Guard-ship base as quickly as possible and wait for escort before proceeding to their destinations. The message closed again with the triple urgency call.

"Well, what do you make of it?" I asked.

For answer he passed me another wad of sheets. The top one, I saw, was a similar message, word for word with the previous one, sent this time from London. It was timed a few minutes later. I turned to the others. One was from Shangun, the Venusian capital, and it was in that planet's international language, of which I knew only a word here and there. The third message, also indecipherable, was, I guessed from the office of despatch, in Tlananian, the language of two-thirds of the Martian peoples.

"You can't read them, of course," Hume said, as I turned the last sheet, "but I've had the one from Venus translated—the Tlananian I can read myself—and you can take it from me that they're identical with the Earth messages. Now, what do *you* make of them?"

"THERE'S no doubt about the urgency of the matter," I said slowly. "The fact that the Venusian and Martian messages have been broadcast in their own tongue shows that to my mind. They couldn't afford to waste even the time necessary to translate them into international code."

"Or meant them solely for their own ships, knowing Earth messages would reach liners like us," Hume said with a puckering of the forehead. "But even that isn't answering my question. What's behind it all?"

"The thing that has been worrying me all along, and that has threatened to upset my holiday more than once," I frowned.

"The Space-visitors—the things—people—that were responsible for the trouble on *M. E. 75*? Isn't that what you mean?"

"I can't see any other explanation."

"Then—perhaps I'm wrong; I hope I am—it looks as though something has happened, some new development of which we're not as yet cognisant, that menaces the safety of every space liner from the three planets that happens to be enroute at the moment. But to think of traffic proceeding under an escort of Guard-ships! It's incredible. Such a thing has never been heard of before in the history of the Universe, not since space-travelling became an accomplished fact. But what are you going to do? Is this the crisis your instructions cover?"

"It's hard to say. Looks to me like a matter for individual judgment, possibly. But at present, providing there are no further developments I can make no move in any direction. You have already got your orders; they come from a body that can over-ride anything I do or suggest, and I think in the circumstances you will be wise to abide by them. Not only that, but carry them out with the greatest celerity possible."

"I haven't wasted time, Jack. I've changed course already." He pointed to the dial-chart where the quivering pointer showed us edging

off at an angle from the red line that had hitherto marked our route to intercept the orbit of Mars. "Also, our locators are sounding space to pick up the nearest Guard-ship. It will probably be a Martian one now, we're so far advanced on our way."

"Whatever it is does not matter as long as it is a Guard-ship," I said wearily. A heaviness had come over me, a weight on my heart, as that dark uncontrolled hinterland of my mind where speculation dwells began to play with grisly possibilities.

Hume shot a glance at me from under his tired and dropping lids.

"Sick of it, already," he said, and, "You're only holidaying. Don't like the interruption to your vacation, eh? Ah, well, you've no responsibilities, no. . . ."

"But there you're wrong," I cut in before he could go further. "I have responsibilities, one big one, at least, aboard this ship."

Something in my tone must have warned him, for his eyes widened.

"Aboard the *Cosmos*!" he exclaimed. "What . . .who is it?"

"Jansca," I said. "Jansca Dirka."

"You mean that, Jack? Is it fact or merely a hope?"

"A fact accomplished. We agreed only this morning that our paths lay together. Her father knows, and has approved."

For one long second he looked at me, then across the table his hand reached out and gripped mine heartily. Only that. He spoke no word of congratulation, but his looks and his handclasp told me all he felt.

"I understand," he said at last. "I understand. Of course our safety means more to you even than perhaps it does to me." Then, almost under his breath, "But a Dirka!"

I caught the word. "Why a Dirka?" I demanded. "What is strange in that?"

"Your luck. Call it that. The Dirkas are the nearest to a race of Kings Mars has had in a thousand years. But you will learn more about that yet. . .from them. Jack, coming back to immediate urgencies, what are we to do?"

"Follow instructions, that's all that's left us. We can't make any other preparations, for we don't know what we may have to face."

"Our armament. . .?" he suggested tentatively.

"Oh, yes. What have you in that way?"

"The two rays. . .heat and the repeller rays. The former won't function too well in free space, I should imagine."

"Why not? It doesn't need an atmosphere. It will go where light goes. We'll see. . . .or rather I hope we won't have the need to see. We. . . ."

There came a warning crackle, thrice repeated, from the sounder at his elbow.

"More messages," he said wearily. "Manners, take it. . .them."

The officer, my conductor, made the sundry adjustments that allowed the door to be opened. It was a messenger from the transmitting room—the *Cosmos* was big enough to have a separate one of her own—with a sealed envelope in his hand.

"For Mr. Sanders," he said. "I was told he was here."

MANNERS passed it to me, the messenger sped away, and the insulating barrage went up again. I tore open the envelope, glanced at it. A word here and there was plain, though it was not the sort of message I could read in its entirety on the spur of the moment.

"A sheet of paper and a pencil, Hume," I said, fumbling. "This is an urgent one, too. I'll have it out for you in a minute or so."

He sat silent while I turned it word for word into readable, understandable English. As I thought, it was from Harran.

"Have reason to suppose," it ran, "that concerted attack is to be made on all space-ships. Possibly invasion of three planets projected. Follows on space-ship discoveries reported in last few days. Confirm general rendezvous order. All Guards are to hold in readiness for immediate duty. All emergency regulations to be put into operation forthwith. No private messages to be transmitted from space-ships, or if received aboard not to be delivered to addressees, except under direction and at discretion of Guard until further orders. Emergency regulations in force from moment of receipt of this message. Identical instructions relayed all Guard-ships and all Guards on space liners.

(Signed) Harran—Tellus
Tambard—Mars
Clinigo—Venus."

I thrust the translation over to Hume. "You had better read this," I said. "It explains the situation far more clearly than any words of mine can do."

Slowly he read it through, and as he read his face blanched. At the end he handed it back to me.

"It means," he said simply, "that you are now in command."

"It means that," I agreed. "But it means more, that you and I and all the rest of us must work together for the common good, the safety of our ship and passengers."

"Yet," he said heavily, "there is so little we can do, save carry on."

I nodded. That was quite patent. We had our rendezvous to make, whether with an individual Guard-ship or a floating base depended on our luck. Apart from that we could only keep watch and guard.

"Arm your men," I said. "Serve out your ray tubes at once. Are all your officers trustworthy?"

"Every one of them. They will take their orders and carry them out, if that's what you mean."

"I do, I want them paraded at once. . .here. Would you care to advise them or shall I?"

"Better you, Jack. I won't cavil at what you say or do in a time like this. You know more of what's pending than I do, and anyway you have my authority to reinforce yours if necessary. About the operators. . . .Had they better come too?"

"Oh, yes. All except the men on duty."

He called Manners to him and gave his orders,

and soon the emergency signals were sounding in each man's quarters. I glanced round the room. It was certainly more spacious than most control rooms, but then the *Cosmos* had been built for big things. Yes, it would hold the officers without any undue crowding. It would be better to talk to them assembled here rather than out on the control deck where we could not be effectively insulated against listeners.

One by one they came to the room, the three officers; the apprentices who were actually junior officers in training; the purser, Parey; the doctor, and others. All told there was a round dozen of them in the room in the end.

Hume wasted no time in preliminaries. "You've been called here," he said, "because of certain matters of importance with which you should be acquainted at the earliest opportunity. What they are Mr. Sanders will explain."

He stopped and gestured towards me as much as to say, "It's your turn now."

I saw curious eyes turn wonderingly towards me. Even Parey who knew who I was knitted his brows, though I fancy he must have guessed part of what I was going to say. But the others had no idea either of my identity or the purport of my remarks until I pinned my Guard's badge in the lapel of my coat where it was plain for all to see. Even then I could see most of them were still frankly puzzled.

I began. I had much to say, but I contrived to get it within small compass. I gave a brief sketch of the condition in which we had found *M.E.75*—there was no need to enlarge on that, as it was already more or less common property amongst the after-guard—and added that similar things had happened to other space ships.

I insisted that as yet we did not know anything about the motive behind these visitations—one could hardly call them attacks—and certainly had no idea from which planet the vandals had come. I hinted, however, what was purely an idea, that there was a chance they hailed from somewhere in inter-galactic space. Then to round everything off I read out the message signed by The Three. I finished, and glanced round the little company. For the moment it seemed they were stunned to silence by my communication.

"Any questions?" I asked. "Now is the time to ask them. We may not have the opportunity to ask or answer them later."

One youngster, one of the apprentices, possibly fed on one of those hectic romances that have been written round the War of the Planets, spoke up.

"Was that right. . .I mean," he stumbled, "is there anything in the suggestion in your message, Mr. Sanders, that an interplanetary invasion is projected?"

"I read you what the message said," I answered. "That is merely supposition. It may be right; it may just as well be wrong. At least we can take precautions against every possible contingency without being alarmists. You understand me?"

"Yes, sir." he said, but I wondered if he really did.

Parey caught my eye. "Does this mean, Mr. Sanders," he said, "that you are in absolute command here?"

"It means," I said deliberately, "that I am responsible to the Interplanetary Board of Control for the safety of this ship and her complement, and if anything goes wrong it is I who will be to blame. I have told you quite plainly exactly what is the state of affairs as far as I know it. More than that I cannot do. But let us have no talk of absolute or any other kind of command.

"Captain Hume and I have discussed the matter thoroughly between us, and we are agreed, as I want you all to be agreed, that the interests of all are the interests of each of us. Unless each man does his utmost with a right good-will we may fail to pull through. And it may hearten you in what is yet to come for you to realize that in a thousand ships all up and down the void this message is being repeated and similar scenes to this enacted. Now has anyone else anything to say before you disperse?"

The first officer, Gond, took a step forward. "I have, Mr. Sanders, and I'd like to make it snappy. I think I can speak for the others. I know them all, so I believe I can take it for granted they'll agree. It's this. What you say goes with us, the more so as Captain Hume is backing you up. That's a mouthful, I think."

I smiled at the quaint archaisms in his little speech, but I could not smile at his sincerity. It was too affecting for that. A murmur that rose from the little group showed, too, how well he had expressed the sentiments of all of them.

"That's that then," I said. "Captain Hume, will you take over, please?"

With a word or two relative to certain re-arrangements he found it necessary to make in the ship's routine, Hume dismissed those off duty, and as the last of them disappeared he turn to me with a sigh.

"There's no doubt about their loyalty," he said. "I'd stand hostage for any one of them. But, Jack, what do you think those chiefs of yours had in mind in censoring private messages? Are they thinking of spies aboard?"

Spies? I had not thought of them in that connection before, but the moment Hume made the suggestion an idea hit me between the eyes.

"Spies?" I repeated. "Yes, I believe that is just exactly what they do mean, but whom we should begin by suspecting here is more than I can tell."

Did he believe me? Something in the glance he shot at me implied that he did not.

CHAPTER XI.

The Inexplicable Incident.

MY further duties took me half an hour or so, then all precautions we could think of having been taken, I was free to go about my own small concerns.

Dinner had long since been ended, and the saloon was bare and empty. Knowing the long hours the kitchen staff put in, I did not feel like giving them the extra trouble of serving me a late meal. Ordinarily I am a small eater, and anyway it would do me no harm to wait for my

next meal till morning. But on the heels of that it occurred to me that in my pocket was something that was quite a good substitute for both food and drink.

I slipped down to my cabin, drew a glass of water from the faucet, and dropped an Oxcta pellet in it. I drank up the resultant mixture and felt all the better for it. But, I warned myself, it would not do to make a regular practice of this; despite what Hume had told me, that it was not habit-forming, I had no wish to put the matter to the test. Yet looking back now what seems to me the strangest thing of all is that my solicitude for others, my wish to save the serving staff from trouble, was actually the means of our salvation.

It was too early to go to bed yet, I thought, and to tell the truth I was not in the mood to sleep for some hours yet to come. The greater part of the responsibility for the safety of the ship's company devolved on me, and it must be admitted that it was no light weight. I wanted time to think things out and if possible formulate some plan of campaign. Since I can always think better with a pipe in my mouth, I filled and lit one. It was against the rules to smoke in one's cabin, but as I am naturally a careful man where fire is concerned I did not give that aspect a second thought.

The result of half-an-hour's intensive thought was zero. A week's meditation possibly would not have got me any further. When all was said and done the initiative did not lie with us, but with those invaders out of space and until we learnt a little more about them and their objects I could see no use in speculating. At the same time I was inclined to discount the alarmist suggestion the Council of Three had made in their broadcast message, for I felt that any interplanetary invasion would have been preceded by something more spectacular than what had happened to date.

Summed up, what did it amount to? Only this, that some strange force had paralyzed a number of space-ships and their crews; the space-ship in one case certainly. Others probably had been boarded by these partly-invisible entities, but nothing had been touched or removed that we could learn, no one had been harmed and no damage done.

Was it possible, to borrow a phrase from one writer who one hundred and fifty years ago forecast something of the sort, that we were being examined in much the same impersonal fashion as a man will examine infusoria under a microscope?

A soft yet penetrating rap sounded on my cabin door, and brought me out of my reverie.

I opened the door an inch or so, and peered out. Jansca was standing there, the light of a mild perplexity and alarm in her eyes.

"Oh, Jack," she said almost breathlessly, "I've been looking for you and wondering. . . Then I saw your light and knocked."

"Come in," I said. "Come in, dear. I've been here some time."

I shut the door and threw the insulation switch. I was getting jumpy these days, taking precautions that a week ago I would have laughed at.

"When you left the table, your meal untouched and untasted, and did not return I feared something was wrong," she said, looking up earnestly into my face.

"You should not," I said gently. "Nothing was wrong with me."

"No?" Her fair brow wrinkled. "But there have been comings and goings, a certain amount of activity amongst the officers that made me think. . . ." She stopped abruptly, and looked to me to supply the end of that truncated thought.

"Made you think what, Jansca?" I said encouragingly.

She put her two hands on my shoulders, and looked me straight in the eyes. Under that penetrating scrutiny I think I must have shifted uneasily.

"Dear," she said suddenly, "tell me what is wrong, if not with you, at least with things in which you are implicated. I know that something, good, bad or indifferent, is afoot."

"Jansca," I said gravely, "sit down. I have something to tell you."

She obeyed, but flung me one quick glance of interest, as though already she had glimpsed something of what I had to tell her.

"This," I said, "is between ourselves. It must go no further than you, not even to your father. Will you promise me that?"

Her face glowed. "Where you and I are concerned, Jack, there is no need of promises, given or taken. We are too much to each other ever to break confidence."

I nodded. That was good hearing, and I said so. "But, Jansca, what I wish to impress on you is that I am revealing to you secret matter, messages that have passed and will be passing between myself and the Council of Three. Perhaps strictly speaking, I should do nothing of the sort, but are you not my promised wife, are we not one in thought and hopes?"

SHE smiled at that, and nestled close against me, looking up at me with her large wistful eyes.

"Never, never, dear one, will you find your trust misplaced," she breathed. "And now tell me what has happened."

Briefly I told her, omitting nothing, stressing nothing. She did not look so grave at the end as I had expected.

"It but follows on what we already knew," she said simply. "What it may portend I cannot say. It may mean trouble for our worlds, or it may be something that can be dealt with very easily, once we understand the reason behind it. But in the absence of more detailed information I believe the Council is taking the right course. But, dear one, does this mean that when we reach Tlanan, if we do in safety, that you and I will be separated for a time?"

That indeed seemed to be her greatest worry.

"I hope not," I said with truth. "If things were left to me, I would marry you out of hand and make the rest of my space-voyage a honeymoon."

"A honey-moon?" For the moment she seemed puzzled, then the meaning of it dawned on her. "Of course," she said brightly, "that is

your Earth-term for the period of adjustment. It is a sweet phrase. Sometimes I wish we Martians were a little less practical in sentimental matters, and a little more sentimental in practical affairs. Strange that we should so reverse things. But you Earthlings, with your idealization of love, of women and what they imply, are teaching us, though"—she turned abruptly to me with eyes and cheeks glowing—"there are those of us who do not need teaching, for to us the whole-hearted gift of ourselves to our men comes as naturally as the day follows night."

"We can all teach each other something," I told her. "We all have much to learn. Perhaps the ultimate aim is that by mixing as we do we planetarians may yet evolve a race as noble as it is good."

She smiled at that. "Too much to hope for, prophet mine. Men and women are much the same the planets over, and they will be the same strange mixtures of good and bad until the end of time."

"Well, we needn't worry about it, as long as we're happy in ourselves," I remarked. My thoughts leaped off at a tangent. "Jansca, beyond that little knife you carry in your girdle, a mere toy at that, have you any weapon of defense?"

"Do I need one?" she queried.

"I don't know," I said frankly, "but it's just as well to be prepared. Can you use a ray tube?"

"I can use anything," she said in a tone that robbed her words of all boastfulness, "once you have shown me how."

Without more words I climbed above my bunk to the ledge where I had hidden my spare supplies, took down the case containing the charges and the duplicate tube. She had seen such before—the ship's guards carried them on every space-boat—but she had never held one in her hands before, and had no idea of its mechanism. But the thing was quite simple to use, and within a very few minutes she had acquired as complete a command over the weapon as though she had been handling it for years.

I loaded the tube, gave her an extra clip or two of the charges, and advised her to conceal it in her dress somewhere, for the ray tube is not the sort of thing a private citizen should carry openly.

"Now," I said, as she slid it out of sight, "my mind's at rest. At the worst you have the means at hand to defend yourself if necessary."

Her lips curved in a smile. "I wonder if it will ever be necessary," she said softly. "I hope not."

I did not answer that, for my mind was troubled about possibilities, and presently she spoke again.

"Are you coming up on the deck for a while, Jack?" she asked. "It wants an hour or two yet of retiring time. We can sit and talk, and perhaps find pleasure in each other's company, if not forgetfulness for the while of what hangs over us."

"Jansca, my dear," I said chuckling, "you seem to be taking rather a pessimistic view of the situation, all of a sudden too."

"And you," she countered, "who should be that way inclined are almost cheerful. Missing a meal seems to do you good." As though her own words had brought back recollection she dropped her bantering tone. "Oh, I'm sorry," she rushed on. "Of course you must be starving, and here have I been talking and keeping you from getting anything to eat. Do you think you could now?"

I smiled. "I don't know that I need food," I told her, and I pointed to the empty glass standing on the ledge beneath the faucet.

For the moment she looked puzzled, then took us the glass—some of the dregs were still in it—and held it close to her nose.

"Ah," she said, "I understand." There came a little pause, just the merest hesitation while she was framing the thought in her mind before putting it into words. Then, "Jack, it is years since I last tasted Oxcta. Do you think tonight, seeing this is a special occasion, that a little, one sip even, would be allowed me?"

"Of course," I said without thinking, though later it occurred to me to wonder whether she could have had any foreboding of what Oxcta was to do for us that night. She declares she had not, myself I am not so sure.

FIVE minutes later we made our way up deck. It was quite crowded, possibly because we were far out in space now, and the myriad stars—more than one can see on any of the inner planets—set in the absolute black of the void had a singularly peaceful and soothing look. I brought Jansca's chair and set it next to mine.

Heads turned and eyes followed us, for I think the news of our impending mating had somehow got about on board, and interested people in us. It is worthy of record, however, that the eyes that followed us were nearly all those of Earthlings. The Martians, as a rule, are self-contained enough to mind their own affairs, and the Venusians, like butterflies, never rest long anywhere. Flitting and tireless they seem to be.

I do not know what Jansca and I talked about. No doubt we chattered idly as lovers will. One thing is certain, we deliberately avoided all talk of the future that was likely to impinge on that dubious thing that menaced the Universe, if we were to believe the warning of the Council.

A man came mincing down the deck, one seemingly wrapped in his own thoughts. It was the carefully selected steps that made me think it was Nomo Kell, though, for the moment, when I glanced up I did not recognize the man. He wore some quaint kind of head-gear, rather like a cap with a visor and ear-flaps, that I do not remember to have seen before, and though the ship's heaters kept the temperature at normal he was muffled to the chin in a coat of light, shiny material. It was the first time I had noticed him dressed thus, but apparently his garments were familiar to the other passengers, for no one gave him more than a passing glance.

"Nomo Kell must be feeling cold," I remarked to Jansca. "See how he is wrapped up."

She did not answer in words, but her hand—we were very close together—tightened warningly on mine. Of course it was no more than coincidence that he should glance up at that exact

moment and shoot a deliberately searching look towards us. It could not have been anything else that the veriest accident, for he was too far from us to have heard what I said, even if I had spoken in far louder tones. Yet Jansca's warning grip, coming at the same instant, sent a stir of uneasiness through me. What if by some species of necromancy he had been able to hear me? What, again, did it matter if he had?

I dismissed the matter temporarily from my mind, and presently the man turned about, retraced his steps and disappeared in the direction up deck from which he had originally come. But now as I watched him I fancied his steps were a little quicker, a trifle more alert, his whole attitude carrying it in a hint of impatience. I waited until he was out of sight.

"Jansca," I said, "do you really think he could have heard me?"

She gave the tiniest shrug to her shoulders. "Who knows?" she said absently. "At least I thought it wise to stop you before you said more."

"But," I objected, "there is no way he could have heard."

"Your own audiophones," she reminded me. "That cap he wore could easily have concealed a pair."

I did not quite agree with her. The audiophones, after all, were attuned to special receivers. I had yet to learn of any invention that could pick up ordinary conversation out of the empty air without the intermediary of mechanical transmission.

I was on the point of explaining this when of a sudden it struck me that the heaters must have developed a defect, and that some of the cold of space was trickling through our shell. The temperature seemed to have dropped perceptibly. Perhaps Nomo Kell with a greater sensitiveness had become aware of this before we had.

"I think," I said softly, "that our friend knew what he was about. Jansca, it strikes me it is getting cold."

She did not answer, and I turned my head to see why. Her hand, too, had suddenly gone chill in mine. I gasped. Her head had slumped down on her breast, fallen in such a way that it would have seemed the natural outcome of her nestling against me had it not been for the iciness of her hand.

A great horror crept over me, a feeling of utter lassitude. Something within me urged me to rise to my feet, to get out of the chair and keep moving at any cost, but even the mental effort necessary to initiate such a course of action was beyond me. I did make some sort of ineffectual movement, but the only result of it was that my grip on Jansca's cold hand loosened and it fell to her side as though weighted with lead.

Through split fractions of a second—too small to measure by any accepted standard of time, though they felt like hours—the advancing tide of chill torpor crept over me, numbing my faculties, freezing my nerve centers. With a gasp of horror I realized what I should have realized before, that we were in our turn in the grip of that mysterious force that had sent more than one space-liner floundering like a derelict about the void.

And at that all things seemed to go misty before me. It was as though a veil of mist had been drawn down between us and the rest of the ship, shutting me out from sound and sight and consciousness of all other life.

CHAPTER XII

The Space-Raiders

BUT this phase must have been merely momentary. For a reason that became apparent later, I did not entirely lose consciousness. I must have trembled on the brink of coma for an instant, then the rising tide of life came flooding back through my veins. In some unaccountable fashion I managed to subdue the pressure of this exterior force, and a gentle glow stole over me.

I felt the slight stir of movement beside me, tried to turn my head, discovered to my great surprise that now I could. I found myself looking into Jansca's wide, expressive eyes.

"Jansca, darling, are you all right?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," she said quickly. "But what has gone wrong? What has happened?"

"Can't you guess?" I said. "The cold . . . . the messages I got this evening . . . . those space liners adrift in the void . . . ."

"Oh." There was an odd catch in her breath. Her eyes widened; her face hardened as she flung a glance about her, and saw all the others on that deck slumped down in their chairs.

"The space-raiders," she breathed. "We are in their hands. But I thought the cold. . . ."

"So did I, Jansca, but for some reason we've managed to fight it off apparently. It's a puzzle."

I made a movement as though to rise, but she caught me by the arm, dragged me back, and clung fiercely to me.

"What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"Look about. Investigate. See what I can learn of this puzzle."

"You mustn't do anything of the sort. My dear, we'll learn more by stopping here, remaining as we are, pretending to be asleep—unconscious—like the others. If we move round, we may blunder into something, gain nothing, lose everything. Don't you see?"

I nodded. There was wisdom in her suggestion, even though the forced inaction irked me. But she was right. Whatever we did we must not blunder.

"Oh!" She caught my arm again, so tightly that I gasped. There was an odd accent of fear in the monosyllable that sent a shock through me.

"What. . . ." I said. . . . "what is it?"

"Look. Can't you see it?" She pointed to the quartzite windows that gave us a view of empty space and the stars beyond. Only now it was not empty. Something that might have been a wisp of smoke, or the drift of thin rain—only that such things could not be in the airless void—seemed to be blocking the windows. Then I saw that it had blotted out the stars, that it was one with the blackness of space, so as to be invisible.

Had it not been that it hid the stars we would not have become aware of it.

In the self-same instant we both realized what it was that we saw. It was the ship of the space raiders!

More correctly we did not see it. We could not see its shape, had no means of knowing that it was there save that it interposed between us and the stars and hid them from our vision.

An idea came to me. I closed one eye. Dimly then I began to see a form, a cigar-shaped thing, the space-ship of these strange entities, resting in mid-ether, so to speak, side by side with our own vessel. No doubt its connecting port was already clamped against our port, which could be opened on the outside by the emergency manual machinery. Even now entrance was probably being made in much the same way we had boarded the drifting *M. E.* 75.

I opened my eye, and stared at the shape beyond the quartzite windows with the sight of both eyes. The shape was no longer visible. It had become absorbed in the blackness of space. But I knew it was there since the myriad diamond-bright stars that should have met my gaze were still hidden. I was satisfied, in my own mind, however, that at last I held the clue to this mysterious quality of invisibility the raiders possessed.*

Jansca's hand gripped mine tighter than ever. The same thought, I knew, was going through both our minds; the same explanation had occurred to me simultaneously. Now that we knew, or thought we knew, much of our apprehension had vanished. Once the nature of a danger is realized it ceases to terrify, and the way is open to combat it.

"You see?" I said. "You understand what it is?"

Jansca nodded. "I know why nobody has seen them so far," she answered, "and I can guess at the principle by which they make themselves invisible. But what I can't yet understand. . ."

SHE did not complete the sentence. Instead, "Hush", she said in a fierce whisper, and slumped down in her chair, releasing my hand as she did so. I took the cue from her. No one glancing at us the next instant would have dreamt that out of all that ship's company we two alone retained consciousness of what was going on about us.

I could not see what it was that had alarmed her, and I dared not raise myself in the chair to find out. I could only wait.

I did not have to wait long. But what I saw seemed for the moment so monstrous and incredible that I could hardly believe my eyes. A procession of bodies was advancing along the deck, the bodies of those officers who should at this time of night have been in the control room. The eerie thing about it all was that the bodies were seemingly floating in the air, at a distance of three to four feet above the deck. Yet when I say floating I must stress the fact that while the extremities, heads and legs, were more or less on a level, in each case the middle part of the body sagged, dipped or drooped, whichever you care to call it.

For a split second I stared, forgetting that I was supposed to be unconscious. Then quickly the meaning of it all came flooding back on me, and with it the memory of that queer tale—which I had half-disbelieved at the time—told to us by Mrs. Galon on board the *M. E.* 75.

The unconscious figures of the officers were not floating along of their own accord; they were being carried! Carried by those invisible entities, whom, for want of a better phrase, we called the space raiders.

I watched. The procession came closer, drew level. At the head and shoulders of each of our men I could see now a vague misty outline, a thing that flickered uncannily in the glare from the stored-sunlight tubes that lit the deck.

Neither Jansca nor I made a movement. We were too utterly unnerved to do anything save sit still and stare through lowered lids at this weird company. We saw the unconscious men deposited in vacant chairs, waited a moment, then came the passing in front of our eyes of those flickering misty things.

I counted. There were eight of them. I cannot be sure now, for at that exact moment Jansca made a slight movement. But it was not so much the movement itself as what it caused that mattered. She had a tiny handbag in her lap, a little thing of light and glittering metal, and as she stirred it slipped to the floor with a tinkling clatter. Foolishly she bent to pick it up before I could stop her.

It was as though several columns of mist opposite us stood still for an instant, then began to advance towards us. A chair was in the way of the oncoming entities. I know that because I saw an odd flicker behind it, then it was pushed to one side.

I think I must have lost my head, that is the only explanation of what I did. I sprang to my feet, drawing my ray tube as I did so, and levelled it at the nearest mist-like figure. In my agitation I loosed the full charge.

There came a spurt of light, and I staggered back, half-blinded. But where the mist had been a moment before there was a tumbled heap on deck, something whose outlines were rapidly thickening and taking shape. As though a body were being molded there under our eyes.

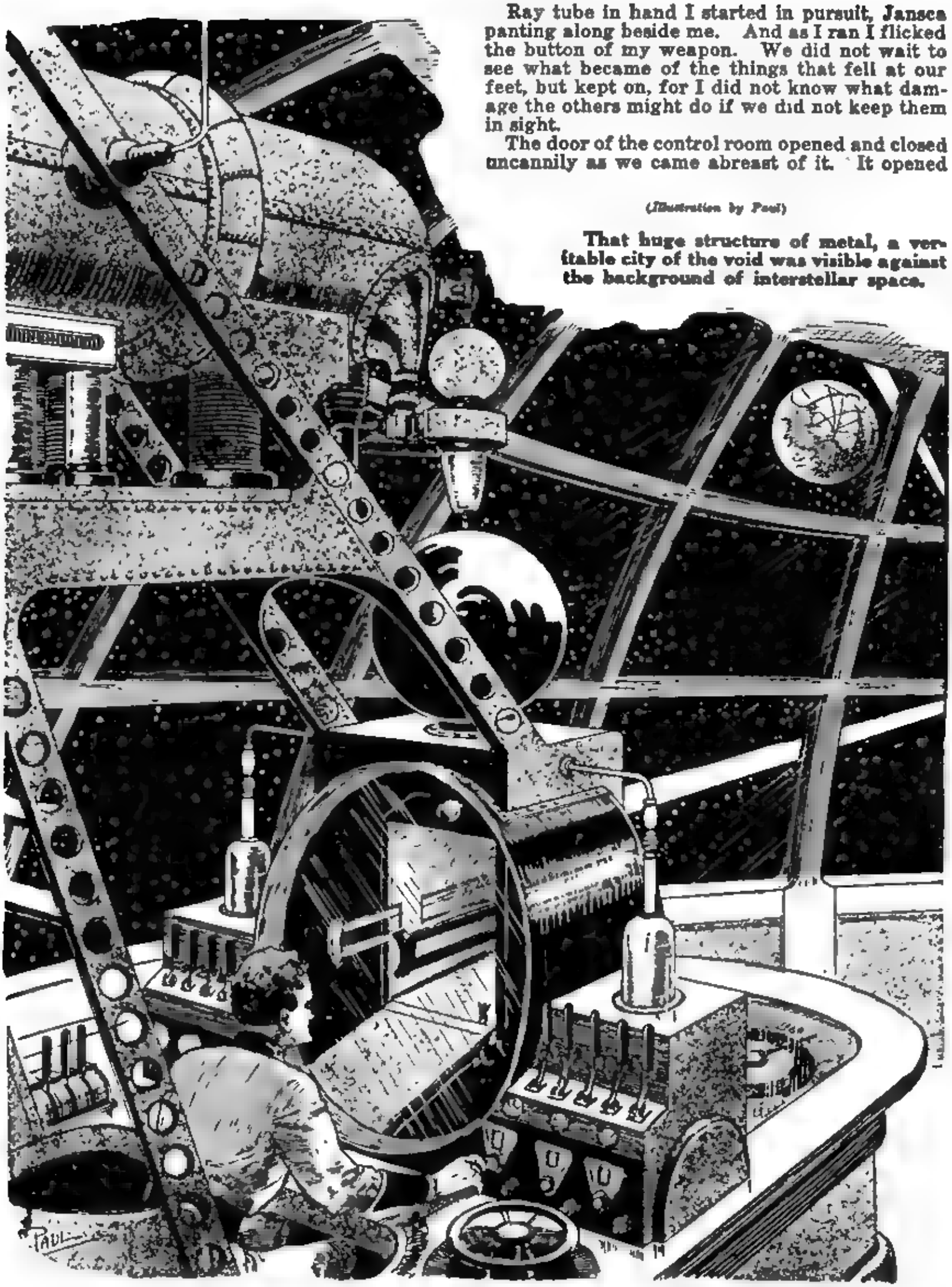
Jansca must have sprung to her feet a moment after me, for almost on the heels of my discharge came another spurt of light from beside me this time, and the almost inaudible click of the ray-tube mechanism. I did not look to see what damage she had done, but tried to keep my eyes on the other mist-wraiths. They were so close to the point of absolute invisibility, however, that I found it harder than I had expected. The very vagueness of their outlines endowed them with a kind of "Will-O'-The-Wisp quality that was in itself disquieting.

A moment I waited—expecting I knew not what diabolical force to be loosed on us in reprisal. But nothing happened; and then abruptly it seemed to me the swirls of mist were vanishing away up the deck in the direction of the control-room quarters.

*The precise principle underlying this problem—a question of light refraction and stereo-optics—is dealt with more fully in Chapter 13.

Ray tube in hand I started in pursuit, Jansca panting along beside me. And as I ran I flicked the button of my weapon. We did not wait to see what became of the things that fell at our feet, but kept on, for I did not know what damage the others might do if we did not keep them in sight.

The door of the control room opened and closed uncannily as we came abreast of it. It opened



(Illustration by Paul)

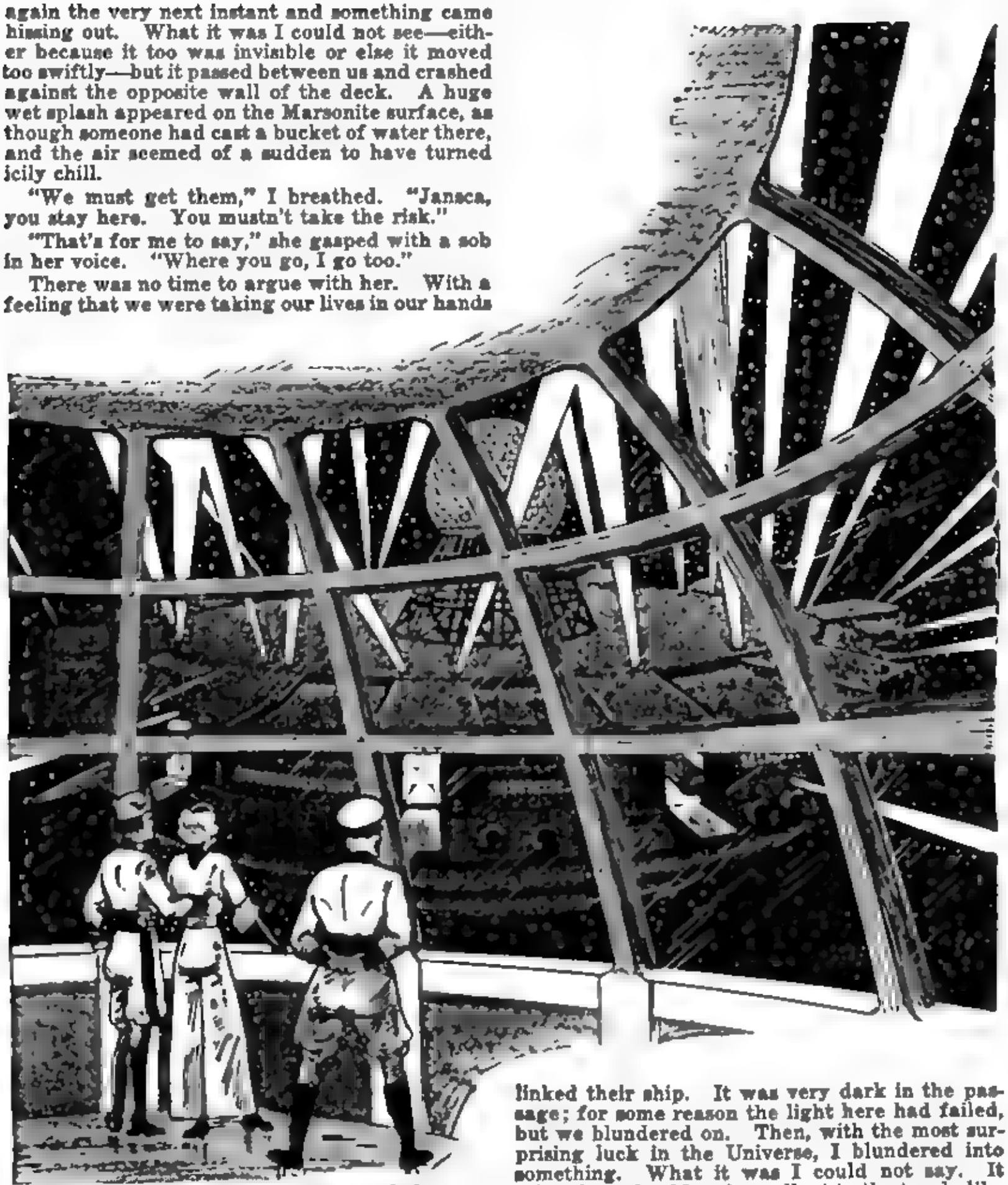
That huge structure of metal, a veritable city of the void was visible against the background of interstellar space.

again the very next instant and something came hissing out. What it was I could not see—either because it too was invisible or else it moved too swiftly—but it passed between us and crashed against the opposite wall of the deck. A huge wet splash appeared on the Marsonite surface, as though someone had cast a bucket of water there, and the air seemed of a sudden to have turned icily chill.

"We must get them," I breathed. "Janaca, you stay here. You mustn't take the risk."

"That's for me to say," she gasped with a sob in her voice. "Where you go, I go too."

There was no time to argue with her. With a feeling that we were taking our lives in our hands



I dashed in through the open door of the control-room, expecting every second to find another icy missile, better aimed this time, hurled at us. But nothing happened. No one opposed our passage, and of the mist-wraiths there was no sign.

The Two Act!

TO make doubly certain we followed the descent down to the port against which they had linked their ship. It was very dark in the passage; for some reason the light here had failed, but we blundered on. Then, with the most surprising luck in the Universe, I blundered into something. What it was I could not say. It felt soft, and cold and repellent to the touch, like a dead body, save that there was a jelly-like flow of it away from under my hand.

In my horror I flickered the button of my ray-tube. The catch must have slipped somehow, for I don't think it could have given a full discharge. I heard an odd sound like a thin wail, there was a rush of cold air past me, then as something creaked under my feet I realized that we were on the edge of the passageway our

visitors had clamped against the port of the *Cosmos*. I drew back abruptly, pulling Jansca with me.

The planets know what would have happened had I not done so. It was purely an instinctive movement, I must say, for I hadn't time to stop and think that the stranger ship would probably cast off at once. Yet this is much what must have happened, and had I not pulled back then another few seconds might have seen us hurled out to our deaths in space, as certainly would have happened when the connection with our port was severed.

I heard a creaking almost at my feet, and blindly flashed my ray-tube in the direction from which the sound came. I know now, what I did not realize at the time, that it was the preliminary movement of casting off. But what I did realize the very next instant was that the air of the *Cosmos* was beginning to whistle off into space. I got the port closed just in time. Another few minutes and we would have been bereft of our atmosphere. Thank Heaven the port had an automatic action from the inside and one touch of a button was sufficient to seal the *Cosmos*.

Panting, I leaned against the port through which we and the whole ship's company had nearly come to our deaths, striving to get my breathing back to normal. Jansca, who had been further back than I, had not fared so badly. No doubt that was why she was able to see initial stages of the catastrophe I had precipitated.

Her cry of horror roused me.

"What . . . . what is it?" I gasped.

A quartzite window had been let into the port, and for some reason or other the slide of this had been drawn back, giving us an outlook on empty space. At the moment it framed a picture that I shall remember to my dying day.

A huge space-ship, larger than anything I had ever seen, was slowly taking form before my eyes. It was a glistening monster that would have made six of the *Cosmos*, the latest product of the interplanetary genius though she was. But the most appalling part of what we saw was that the stranger vessel seemed as though she were breaking in halves. A great gap showed in the quarter nearest to us, a red-rimmed outline, that spread as we watched. To this day I am not quite sure just exactly what had occurred, though I feel that that last flicker of my ray tube must have set my opponent afire instead of killing him outright.

How or why the blaze spread, I cannot say; the only thing of which I really can be certain is that they must have had a store of explosives of unknown potency on board. For, even as we watched, the huge ship stretched out like an overfilled balloon, and burst into a myriad fragments that whirled and glowed, that faded and passed at last in flickering extinction out into the uncharted depths of space.

The *Cosmos* bounced like a kicked football, and the vibrations of that explosion, soundless though they were, reached out and buffeted us a thousand miles or more out of our course. Jansca and I were thrown against each other, and dropped battered, bruised and breathless on the dark floor of the passage.

I climbed to my feet, spoke to her. Fumbling for her hand I found it, and helped her upright. For the moment we both gasped in the thin, rarefied air. It was that which reminded me how narrowly we had escaped a terrible death.

Ordinarily the moment the connecting tube of the stranger vessel had broken away from our open port, every scrap of air in the *Cosmos* should have rushed out into the vacuum of space, hurling us before it like straws in a gale. But no such thing happened. Beyond the whistle and sizzle of escaping air nothing had happened. True, I had jumped at once and pressed the button that sealed the port, but ordinarily even that would not have saved us.

The actual explanation was that the *Cosmos* was divided into a series of small, practically, air-tight compartments that could be sealed instantly and automatically. The abrupt withdrawal of the air in the particular compartment in which we were had by the alteration of pressure at once sealed the other parts of the ship against leakage, and saved our lives. Now that the port had been closed, however, valves had come into operation that allowed more air to seep gradually back into the empty compartment.

It was the realization of this that made me go cannily. The little air left in the passage where we were was thin enough in all conscience and its effect on us was momentarily becoming more pronounced. I felt dizzy and something was wrong apparently with both my lungs and heart. Jansca, used to a greater degree to a thinner atmosphere, was not so distressed. Nevertheless the sooner we got back to a normal pressure the better for us both.

I DID not waste words and air in telling her what I wanted, but drew her back to the center of the ship. She came staggering, as I most certainly did myself, until a few yards brought us up against the valved door that had fallen into place behind our backs.

Though the lights were off here, there should be a switch somewhere. After some ineffectual fumbling I found it, and a tube overhead glowed brightly enough to show me the mechanism that opened the door. I turned the graduated scale, letting the air fill in by degrees, for too sudden an alteration of pressure might have done us immense harm.

Gradually our lungs filled out, our hearts ceased racing and our distress vanished. We could open the door now and pass on without any bad results. The rest of the way, too, was lighted.

Jansca still clung to me. Now that the worst was over the reaction had come, and it was hard to recognize her as the daring Amazon who had taken a stand beside me and driven the strange invaders from our ship.

I made at once for the control room, for I had no idea how the vessel was drifting, and until I saw the charts and dials there was no way of determining how far off our course we were. It took a few minutes' intricate calculation before I learned what I wished to know. That done it was a simple matter to correct the error, and

bring the *Cosmos* back to the space-lane she had been following. Locking the gears so that we could not slew off again I turned away to find Jansca regarding me.

"Well, my dear," she said, "is it all right now? I didn't care to interrupt you before by speaking. I know how important it is for us to get back at once on our course."

"I think everything's right as far as this end of it is concerned," I told her, "but there's still quite a lot for us to do."

I took her in my arms and kissed her. "That," I said, "is for the help you've given me. Come on now, my dear, better not waste more time. I'm not sure, you see, whether we killed or merely paralyzed those folk we dropped, so keep your ray tube handy in case of trouble."

I think she must have forgotten till that moment that, dead or alive, there were still some of the space-raiders left on board. She started at my words and her face paled.

Our fears were groundless, however. None of the raiders was left alive. Jansca and I, by some species of lucky accident, had killed all those we struck. There were seven of them, scattered at intervals along the route from the control floor to the spot on the promenade deck where we had first encountered them. Whatever the process they used to render themselves invisible, its effects evidently were neutralized by the discharge from our ray-tubes, for the bodies themselves were now quite plain to be seen.

We did not linger to examine them, however. More pressing matters awaited our attention, and when we got Hume and his assistants revived, then would be time enough to satisfy our very natural curiosity.

Either we had not been treated to as big a dose of the anesthetic cold as the *M. E.* 75, or else something had happened to neutralize it very quickly, for there were signs, as we made our way down the deck, that some of the company were already stirring. Hume, as a matter of fact, had slid down from the chair on which they placed him—not too carefully it appeared—and was lolling on the decking in a sitting position with his back resting against the chair.

I caught him by the shoulder and shook him. He opened his eyes, blinked stupidly, then lurched sideways as though he were going off into a faint. I caught him.

"Steady on," I said. "Here, wake up!" And I shook him again.

This time he opened his eyes to their full, stared from Jansca to me in a puzzled fashion.

"Ah, Sanders," he said slowly, "what's wrong?"

"Look here, Hume," I said desperately, "pull yourself together as quick as you can. Something has gone wrong, terribly wrong, but I can't tell you while you're in that state. Make an effort, man."

He held out his hand to me, and with an effort I hauled him to his feet. He stood there an instant swaying, then with what must have been a powerful effort of will he got himself under control.

"Go on, Jack," he said urgently. "I think I'm all right now. I'm coming round at any rate. What *has* happened? The last I can remember is doing something in the control-room, and now I come to and find myself out here. It's not—?"

He did not finish the sentence, but a flicker of alarm passed across his face. I guessed what he had left unsaid.

"Those space-visitors we were warned against," I said. "Yes, we had a raid from them, though this time there's been casualties."

"Casualties? Gods! Any of us killed?"

"No. The raiders. Jansca and I. . . ." I stopped, finishing with an expressive gesture.

"But how"—his brow wrinkled—"how in the stars did you escape? Why weren't you sent off into a coma too?"

"I don't know, not rightly. I've my own ideas, but they can wait for explanation until later. Meanwhile. . . . Do you feel better now?"

"Much." He brushed a hand across his brow and involuntarily squared his shoulders. "This stuff seems to wear off quickly, once one opens one's eyes. Head a bit dizzy still, but I think I can carry on. But, Jack, the ship!"

"I've set her on her course. The automatic control will carry on."

"But a meteorite. . . . If we should strike one."

"I think the locator and the repeller ray will deal with it before that happens. Still for the time being we'll have to take our chance. I would suggest, however, that we lessen the possibility of danger by waking up the rest of your fellows."

He made a movement as though to go off and do it at once. I caught his sleeve.

"Stay," I said. "Jansca will attend to that. You and I have other things to do. We've killed some of the space-raiders. Their bodies. . . ."

"Yes?" he said quickly.

". . . . Had better be taken from here. We don't want curious passengers prying around. Perhaps you and I between us can get them on to the control-deck. Then we may have the worst of it over before the bulk of the passengers are awake enough to realize what we're doing."

He hesitated a moment, then looked around. Jansca, dear, loveable, helpful soul, had not waited for me to make a direct request. The moment she had heard my suggestion she had gone systematically to rouse the unconscious officers, and acquaint them with the situation.

"All right." Hume took a step forward. "Your suggestion is a good one. The less we alarm anyone the better."

THE details of our task can well be spared, but it was over and done with and our space-visitors removed to the control-deck in less time than we had anticipated. Jansca, too, had done her work well. When, at last, we paused for breath and looked about us, it was to find that the officers had trickled back to their places, looking sick and bewildered. The mechanical side of the running of the ship was being taken up again where it had been incontinently dropped.

The passengers, too, were stirring, all aware that something bizarre had occurred while they were unconscious. Each tried to fit his or her own impression in with those of their neighbors

in the vain hope of forming some intelligible design from the whole. The guard-bar at the entrance to the control deck was set, however, and a junior officer stationed there to prevent any invasion of our privacy. Curious as they might be, the passengers would have to wait their turn.

The moment we began to take up running again I gave Hume an outline of what had transpired. I could see that he was not quite sure whether to be most impressed by our luck—he called it daring—in clearing the ship between us, or puzzled because the general coma seemed to have passed us by. It was pretty plain to me now why we had not been left unaffected, but the reason of it was something that I did not want to advertise unduly. I fancied he would agree with me when he knew.

"And now," I said, "perhaps it would be as well to have a look at our bag."

Thus unfeelingly I spoke of the dead space-visitors, yet in a way I could feel no contact of humanity with them. That they were not ordinary interstellar bandits I felt convinced already; they were alien beings with whom my experience had nothing in common.

Jansca moved forward with us. I would rather she kept away, but she was insistent and for once I did not gainsay her.

An odd sense of familiarity struck me the moment I had leisure to look the dead beings over carefully. There were, I think I have noted, seven in all, and each was clad from neck to knee in a coat of some light shiny material, the head of each was covered by a cap of the same stuff with a mica-like transparency in front for the eyes.

I gasped as I realized where I had seen such garments before. Jansca too, recalled, for her eyes met mine meaningly.

I bent down swiftly, fumbled with the visor of the helmet. Inadvertently I must have pressed some spring, for the visor shot back, revealing the face of the dead being. Even in death there was a certain horrible suggestion of malignant power about it that made me recoil involuntarily. But in an instant I recovered myself.

A cry from Hume brought me round to him. He had been examining the next being, and had managed to get the helmet clean off the head. As I turned he was standing with it in his hand, an expression of utter amazement stamped on his face.

"What is it?" I cried, and Jansca and I moved a step nearer.

"Look!" he said huskily, pointing.

We looked. The wide staring eyes, vacant of life now, were an odd shade of purple, the pupils queerly flecked; the skin of the face was an odd blotchy red and starting at the forehead and running back to the occiput was a horn-like ridge.

I nodded. "They're all like that," I said. "They're all the same race, no doubt of that."

"Yes, yes," Hume said quickly, "but this particular one. . . . He's not a stranger. I've seen his face before. . . .on this ship."

"I know," I said deliberately, letting the words sink in. "And his name, in case you have forgotten, is Nomo Kell."

CHAPTER XIII

Rendezvous

"NOMO KELL." Hume nodded. "The man you were suspicious of from the first time you saw him. I only wish now," he added bitterly, "that I'd taken notice of your suspicions."

"What could you have done, or I for that matter?" I returned. "I couldn't give a name to my suspicion. I felt he was odd, that's all. And all the taking notice in the Universe wouldn't have made matters one whit the better. As it is now we know something. We've made a point of contact, and we have some sort of a clue to guide us when we want it."

Others of the officers were gathering round now, staring curiously. Gond, the first, came out of the control-room, and stopped with a little gasp of surprise. I could see from the man's face that he was itching to know all that had happened, and I could hardly blame him. In his shoes I would have had even more difficulty in suppressing my curiosity.

He was passing by when Hume called him. "Just a moment, Mr. Gond," he said. "We may need you."

Hume himself turned back to me. "Jack," he said, "what should we do with these bodies? It's for you to say."

"Keep one, dressed and all," I said promptly. "It may be wanted for purposes of study. The others, we'd better bury in space. But strip their cloaks and helmets first. They'll certainly be wanted for examination, whatever comes or goes."

"Good," he said, "that's what I thought you'd say, and that's why I asked Gond to wait. I'll tell him now."

He gave the first officer instructions, satisfied his curiosity in part, and came back to us. Over his arm were the cloak and helmet he had stripped from Nomo Kell.

"Jack," he said, "you and Miss Dirka may wish to have a talk with me. I know I want to talk with you. My cabin's the most private place on this ship, and I suggest we go there."

I looked at Jansca and she nodded. "All right," I said to Hume. "Lead the way."

It wasn't until we were comfortably seated in Hume's cabin and all precautions taken against outside interference that any of us spoke again. At last Hume looked at us, a trifle suspiciously, I fancied, though that may have been merely my over-wound imagination.

"What I'd most like to know," he said deliberately, "is why you two alone, out of all the ship's company, were not overcome."

"It's quite simple," I said smiling.

"You suspected something of the sort—such a raid as this I mean—and took precautions against it, I presume?"

I laughed at that. "Look here, Hume," I said, "as it turns out we did take precautions against being sent to sleep, but the oddest part of it all is that we did it unwittingly. We hadn't the faintest idea at the moment of what we were really doing."

"Well, then, by accident you've discovered

some way of combating this stuff or force or whatever it is that Nomo Kell's people use, so I think it's up to you to make your discovery public property."

"It can't be done," I told him. "You and Jansca, for instance, would be the first to protest against me doing anything of the sort."

Jansca made an odd movement of impatience. "Don't mystify us merely to amuse yourself, Jack," she said softly. "I don't know anything more than Captain Hume does of this matter. True, I fancy I can guess what you're hinting at, nevertheless I want to hear the facts from your own lips and confirm or disprove my guess. What is it, my dear? Can't you see we're both impatient?"

For answer I put my hand in my pocket, drew out a little steel box, opened it and placed it on the table between us.

"That," I said.

Hume half-started to his feet. "Oxcta!" he exclaimed, shooting a glance across at Jansca. "Is that what you guessed?"

She nodded. "Rather," she corrected the impression in the next breath, "I arrived at that conclusion by a process of elimination. Something must have acted on our behalf to counteract the effects of that perishing cold. The only thing common to us tonight—the antidote—was that." She gestured towards the open steel box and the pellets of Oxcta.

"Jack," she went on, "missed his dinner. With his usual forethought for others he wouldn't trouble the kitchen staff getting a late meal solely for him, so he decided to carry on on Oxcta. I came down to see him, saw the signs of the stuff, and asked for some myself. I'm glad now I had it. It kept me awake, energized me, and gave me a chance to be of help."

"And it seems you were of considerable help, too, Miss Dirka," he said heartily. "If the Council don't make you an Honorary Member of the Guard, they don't know merit when they hear of it. If Jack won't report you I shall."

"You'd better do it," I hinted. "Mightn't look well coming from me, seeing we're going to marry soon."

"NEVER mind me, what I do or don't deserve," said Jansca calmly. "There are more important matters to be dealt with now than my deserts."

"Good girl," said Hume appraisingly. "Jack's going to have a helper, I see. Practical at that."

"You men aren't," she shot back. "Let us get to business."

"In what way? What can we do?" I queried.

"We've discovered certain facts," she began. "I suggest we make them public. It may save lives; it will certainly save trouble."

Hume leaned forward across the table, his dark face suddenly gone grave. "Up to a point you're right, Jansca," he said with the easy freedom of an old friend. "But the main fact, the one that is going to be the most important factor in fighting this menace is one that we can't make public. You and Jack retained your consciousness and were able to make a clean sweep of this ship's crew simply because of Oxcta."

"And," I put in quickly as he paused, "that we can't broadcast."

"No, I'm with you there," Jansca agreed. "I hadn't that in mind myself anyway. But before we leave that particular item let me tell you there is a method of getting over that difficulty. I'm Martian born, Captain Hume is Martian by adoption, and Jack here is—" for the moment I thought, shuddering, that she was going to say 'of Sonjhon blood', but she ran on—"going to marry a Martian.

"It's a bond, of a sort. We can talk between us of things we'd otherwise keep to ourselves. When we reach Tlanan, if you'll allow it, I'll see the Council, tell them what Oxcta did for us, and suggest a plan. Tambard will listen to me, that I know. We can make a solution of it—no need to divulge the secret of its preparation—and supply it to the fighting forces of the planets."

"Not a bad idea at all," said Hume. "But we've yet to reach Tlanan. Go on, Jansca, I think you've more to say."

"I have. The Oxcta I'm merely suggesting as the safer and surer way. In the meantime there's another method, more cumbersome, of course, but it will serve until a better one can be put into operation."

She flung us a glance of withering scorn. "You men, with your superior intellects. Why, it takes a woman to teach you what you've seen with your own eyes. Didn't your experience on the *M. E.* 75 show you anything, the two of you?"

It had shown me something, and the meaning of it hit me as she spoke.

"The emergency suits!" I cried.

"That's it," she agreed. "It means wearing them day and night, but they're built to stand the absolute zero of space at a pinch. And the one thing we know about this anesthetizing cold is that no matter how it is produced it doesn't remain constant. It drops—to 44 below, you thought, Jack—and when it reaches a certain point the temperature begins to rise again until it gets back to normal.

"Perhaps it could be kept constant, though all we can say is that so far we've had no experience of that. Point No. 1, then, is the constant wearing of space suits. I'm taking this, of course, as applying only to the fighting forces. Probably all passenger and freight vessels will be laid up if this menace develops to any extent."

"Have you any Point 2?" I asked. I had made a contracted note of the first item while she was talking.

"And three and perhaps four, too," she said. "Taking them down, Jack? Good. Well, log it this way. The space-visitors can be killed. We—you and I—have killed them with the ray tubes. Death, accident or injury renders them visible again. Their ships can be made visible by the same means."

"Wait. One moment," I interrupted her. "I've an idea. Hume, that helmet and cloak. Hand them over, please.

He did so. For a few moments there was absolute silence in the cabin while I examined first the cloak, and then the helmet. I had begun by

thinking that invisibility was induced by the substance with which the two articles were painted, but a second's consideration showed me that in one case at least this could not be so.

I had seen Nomo Kell walking the deck with this self-same cloak on him, and no doubt the queer head-gear that had then attracted my attention had been the helmet with the visor and ear-flaps drawn up. Obviously then this invisibility was not a permanent feature due entirely to the nature of the reflecting surfaces of the material; they might play a certain part in the result, no doubt, but actually, the invisibility could be turned on or off at will, so to speak.

In view of that, the problem narrowed down to a question of vibrations, and this pre-supposed a battery of some sort. Presently I found on, a tremendously light battery of the new Dirac type, small enough to be concealed under the left arm-pit of the cloak. I doubt very much whether it could have weighed more than a couple of ounces.

Then by accident I discovered that one of the buttons on the cloak acted as a switch by which the current inducing the vibrations could be turned on and off. I found this out by the simple process of turning it idly. To my astonishment the button pivoted round in a half-turn, and the cloak incontinently vanished. I could still feel its weight and substance in my hand; I fancied even that I could see it as a vague misty transparency, but even of this I could not be sure.

"You see!" I cried. "It has vanished!"

NEITHER of the others seemed as surprised as I had expected. Jansca appeared to take the discovery for granted; and as for Hume, well, I fully believe that by then he was past being astonished by anything.

"I've never seen the principle applied before," he remarked, "but it's a thing that's been more or less common knowledge for many years. Ever since Einstein enunciated his views on the curvature of space early in the twentieth century it has been felt that invisibility could be induced. Curved light, that's what it is, light curved so that it flows round the object instead of being reflected back from it. Once you've found a mechanical method of bending a light ray out of its path, you've achieved practical invisibility."

"I won't say you're entirely wrong," I remarked, as I twisted back the button and once more rendered the cloak visible. "In fact I think you're quite right . . . . up to a point. This prepared surface does play a big part in the process, how much so we can't say until the stuff has been examined. But apparently its properties aren't constant. They have to be activated by the vibrations set up by this battery."

"I'm afraid I don't quite grasp that," Jansca said with a puzzled air. "You must remember that I haven't studied light vibrations and stereo-optics as you space-liner men have to."

"It's simple enough," I told her. "Put it this way. You know that human ears, whether they are Martian, Tellurian or Venusian, have a limited range of audibility."

She nodded. "I know that. The range varies a little from race to race and also from individual to individual."

"And from man to animals, and from animals to birds," I went on. "Birds and animals can hear sounds that are too high or too low in the scale to make any impression on our ear-drums. The same thing applies to sight. Our eyes are attuned to respond merely to a limited range of vibration. Get above or below that limited range and a thing becomes invisible. It is a result that can be obtained mechanically by speeding up the rate of light vibrations."

"Or by slowing them down," said Hume. "Either would answer, I take it."

"I should imagine so," I said a trifle dubiously. "It's merely a matter of getting beyond the limited scale of vibrations that can be perceived by the human eye. Above or below that scale, the result to my mind would be the same. At any rate this little gadget in the cloak apparently works the miracle, so I don't see that the rest matters."

"Doesn't it?" Jansca interrupted. "I should think it rather important."

"Why?" I queried interestedly. I knew she had a singularly clear sense of perception in most matters, and when she made a suggestion it was usually worth listening to. In this case no doubt, seeing that she came to the discussion with a mind unclouded by preconceived ideas, the chance was by no means remote that she had seized on some point we had overlooked.

"Because," she said slowly, "if we wish to combat this invisible menace we must know something about the methods they use to produce it."

I flung out my hands, and nodded towards the cloak and helmet on the table.

"We do," I said. "There's the evidence."

"And your last words," she retorted scathingly, "are evidence that you don't quite realize the nature of one at least of your discoveries."

"Go ahead," I smiled. "We're both willing to be instructed."

"Well, in the first place we found that when we attacked these people with our ray tubes their visibility returned slowly and gradually. Therefore the ray has power to neutralize the vibrations that induce invisibility. Most probably it breaks the circuit somehow. Is that plain enough?"

"Of course," I said, springing to my feet. "I see what you're driving at. Our ray becomes effective by using a high-scale vibration. It is so high in fact that it can also speed up the vital processes of a human being to the very point of dissolution. What you actually mean is that if the invisibility vibrations are high scale ones our ray would not neutralize them, but merely accentuate them."

"Speed them up," said Jansca. "Exactly. So the vibrations we are seeking must be below, not above the range of human perception. The ray tube discharge speeds them, you see, to a pitch where they again enter our scale."

Yet the idea even when so expounded took some digesting. I was familiar with the possibility of light vibrations so fast that they became imperceptible, but this suggestion that they could be so retarded that they could not be seen seem-

ed utterly fantastic. Nevertheless this was more or less what had happened. The field of force set up by the vibratory apparatus slowed the light waves down so much that for all practical purposes they ceased to exist.

Put in another way, they took so long to make themselves perceptible that they made no impression at all on the retina of the eye. Yet even that statement must admit of modifications. Our own experience and that of Mrs. Galon on the *M. E.* 75 showed that objects thus rendered invisible for all practical purposes really retained a sort of wavering tenuosity of outline that was however far too vague and misty for them to be recognized as substances and forms.*

"And now," I said, dropping back into my seat again, "the sooner we make our discoveries known in the proper quarters the better for the three worlds. None of us are scientists, and our deductions may have to be checked over for errors, but the main point is that our ray not only renders our antagonists visible, but will also kill them. It it is not necessary to kill them I think they can be deprived of their invisibility by a non-lethal ray of the same vibratory pitch. How's that?"

"An epoch-making discovery, I should imagine," said Jansca with a slightly sarcastic note in her voice. "Jack, suppose you code this information—you Guards have a code of your own, I believe—and beam it to the representatives of the Council."

A subtle way of intimating to me that I was wasting time in speculating that could be done better by trained minds!

I drew my pad towards me, scribbled quickly for some minutes while the others sat silent, awaiting my pleasure. At last I flung down my pencil and looked up.

"I've made it as clear as I possibly can," I said, "though I've had to put some words in English, since there is no equivalent in—in the code I use." In my unthinking hurry I was near to blurting out the name of the language we Guards used for our communications, but luckily I pulled myself up in time. Near and dear as Jansca now was to me, good friend and comrade though Hume might be, to neither of them could I divulge what was an oath-bound secret of the Interplanetary Guard.

"Want to send it yourself?" said Hume in reference to the message. "I'll have the transmitting room cleared if you wish."

He was not anxious to do that, however, I could see quite plainly, for even as he made the offer his hand hovered over the bell-push on his desk.

"Doesn't matter," I assured him. "The operator on duty can send it providing he sends it as it stands. He won't know what it means, of course, so he'll have to take particular care."

"Right." Hume pushed the button, and waited for the answer to come from the transmitting room. Almost immediately the surface of his vision-plate glowed, and the voice of the operator sounded in the room. Hume had left his communicator open so that we could hear every word that was said.

"Operator? Captain Hume here. Message to be sent at once. Yes, general call to Guard-ships. Is your vision-plate clear? Good. Here's the message then."

He took the first sheet on which I had written my report, special sheets prepared for the purpose and cut to size, and placed it in a clamp that held it steady against the vision-plate. A few seconds passed, then came the operator's voice through the communicator, "Next sheet, please, Captain."

The process was repeated until the sheets were exhausted, then again came the calm, unhurried voice of the operator, "Message completed, Captain. I'll call through when I get an answer."

The light in the vision-plate surface died, and Hume handed me back the sheets. "You know how best to deal with these," he said meaningly.

I did. I wadded them up, dropped them in the little basin under the water-faucet, and allowed a trickle to play on them. The sheets spread out, dissolved into liquid, and passed down the flush pipe into the depths of space.

I was turning back from my work of destruction when the communicator sounded again.

"Message for Interplanetary Guard Officer Sanders, aboard Space-Liner *Cosmos*," came in the operator's metallic tones. "Message begins. 'Space-Liner *Cosmos* required to report immediately at Martian rendezvous base. Signature Tambard.' Message ends."

I whistled softly. The message had been hurled at hot-speed from Gaudien, the Martian Guard-ship base, and since it was signed by Tambard it followed that he was already at work on the problem that had suddenly been offered the planets for solution.

I had met Tambard once or twice in the course of my work. A singularly dynamic personality when roused to action, yet one whom it took much to stir. That he should be directing investigations in person away from his own planet suggested that matters might already have reached a stage of greater seriousness than we had imagined possible.

CHAPTER XIV

The Gaudien Base

EXACTLY twenty three and a half hours after receiving the message we arrived at Gaudien.

On board the *Cosmos* things had already reached the stage where it was manifestly impossible to keep the real state of affairs hidden any longer from the passengers. Rather than have wild rumors racing round the ship I prepared a digest of the situation, and had it posted on the various notice boards. I flatter myself that I made it as bromidic as possible in tone without in anyway seeking to disguise the position. There was no sense in pretending there was no occasion for alarm. Instead I called on all to give every possible help to the staff to enable them to maintain smooth running.

My appeal, I fancy, justified the terms in

*The parallel of slow-motion films form perhaps the best practical exposition of what this slowing down process involves.

which it was cast by the result it achieved. There was no panic, and no sign of alarm anywhere. A touch of anxiety and apprehension I did notice, and Jansca reported that she had literally been besieged by questioners, who wanted a fuller explanation of the events of the night. She handled them all with her good-humored Martian tactfulness.

Feeling from the first that we required someone who, while still one of the passengers, could speak with a certain authority, I had appointed her to the position. Her work was simply to keep the social activities moving, and deprecate any alarmist tendencies. Our alliance was a matter of common knowledge throughout the ship, and as a consequence Jansca was taken as being absolutely in my confidence and so every word she uttered carried twice the ordinary weight.

Apart from that she did her work nobly. The Council, I was sure, would have no hesitation in appointing her an honorary Guard once my report went in and they had time to study it. Both she and her father would certainly value the silver comet's tail that is the symbol of that honor far more than they would the Interplanetary Guardsman's own badge. After all not one civilian in a million ever qualifies for that honorary award, perhaps, the highest decoration the planets know.

To come to Gaudien.

Long before we made contact that huge structure of glittering metal, a veritable city in the void, was visible against the background of interstellar space. I have seen it a hundred times, and each time I find myself marvelling anew at the mechanical ingenuity that constructed it as much as at the brains that conceived it.

In the early days of interplanetary travel it became increasingly obvious that the Guardships must have some base in the void to obviate the necessity of having to run for their home planets for repairs and fuel. We Earthlings were fortunate in that in our own Moon we had a ready-made base a quarter of a million miles away. So on the side of our satellite that is invisible from Earth our refuelling and repair depot was established.

Mars, less fortunate, had to construct such a base in space. The result is a lasting monument to the friendship between three worlds, that banished the last of that ill-feeling which lingered for years after the disastrous business of the War of the Planets. For the engineers of three worlds gave of their best in cooperation to produce this floating miracle in space.

If we Earthlings can claim more credit for it than the engineers of the other two planets it is traceable to the fact that the plans for the Gaudien base were actually based on designs drawn up so long ago as the year 1929 by Captain Hermann Noordung, a German engineer and authority on mechanics, who was perhaps the first of all Earth-men to deal with the problem of space navigation seriously.

The final result is all the more remarkable when one remembers that the greater part of the work was done in free space, that only the nucleus was built on Mars, and the rest of the floating base built up bit by bit by men working in space suits of metal, which again we owe to Captain Noordung's fertile invention.

THESE space suits were necessary at the beginning, since the men had to work in an airless, heatless void, and under remarkably trying conditions. But once Gaudien—for so the base was named after the Martian engineer who played the greatest part in its construction—was completed, the scientists immediately set to work to provide it with an atmosphere of its own. For long they were unsuccessful, but at last the many difficulties were overcome and today Gaudien exists as a distant satellite, or more correctly a minor planet, which moves with Mars along its orbital path around the Sun.

The huge city in space, for such it was, was alive with lights, light so confusing that only the Guards' captains actually know the meaning of them all. The ordinary space-liners seldom approach close to Gaudien; usually they are content to give the place a wide berth, and when they do not it is because either they are in trouble or in charge of a Guard. The facetious ones claim that the two conditions are more or less synonymous, though this is a libel on a highly specialized and admirable police force.

Naturally I had to take over control myself and order the approach, and on the nose of the *Cosmos* we had switched on the three triangular lights, green, white and red, that showed an officer of the Guard was on board.

An answering signal was flashed out from the nearest light pylon on Gaudien, a directional beam that told me where to berth my vessel. I had merely to keep the nose of the *Cosmos* dead in the center of that beam of light, and the rest would follow. We had already, quite three hours before this, slowed down as much as possible. Nevertheless the force of our impetus was so great that we had to work the repeller rays to keep from crashing headlong into the vast mass of Gaudien. However, all went well, and we made a beautifully soft landing in the slips alongside the pylon from which our directional beam had been flashed.

As the clamps closed over our hull and drew it down softly into the nest prepared for it, a gangway was run up against our main entrance port, and the moment it was opened half-a-dozen Martian officials strode through.

I was there at the entrance to meet them, and I recognized the foremost one as the redoubtable Tambard himself, and a little to my surprise I saw just behind him the dapper bird-like figure of little Clinigo, the Venusian member of the Council. I had not expected him, and the latest news had been that he was on his home planet. But apparently I had been misinformed on this.

Tambard was tall even for a Martian, but he was built so perfectly in proportion that it was only when one saw him standing beside an Earthman that his real height became apparent. He towered over me, and there was a frown on his face that I liked but ill.

I need not have troubled myself about that, however, for his first words set me at my ease.

"Ah, Clinigo," he said to his confrére with that

easy disregard of all titles that marked the Council as men apart, "here is Sanders himself. Clinigo, it is your good fortune to meet in the flesh one of the smartest space-captains in the Interplanetary Service. Tellus has the honor of producing him."

Long before I had become acquainted properly with Tambard I always fancied there was an under-current of sarcasm in words such as these, but now I knew him well enough to realize that he meant exactly what he said, neither more nor less. He was pleased with me, pleased with my poor way of handling things, and he said so in the Martian fashion, extravagantly.

I reddened under his words, none the less I was pleased in my heart that Jansca was near me to hear it all. Words like these, from one of the three who have more to do with the destinies of the inner planets than any other men, can mean much when one has the consciousness of duty done to the best of one's ability.

Clinigo stepped forward at the introduction, with his right hand on his heart in the formal fashion of the Venusian, and I brought my hand up smartly to the salute. I was no longer in mufti, but had donned my uniform, the sky-blue of the Guards with the silver Guard-ship on each wing of the collar, and the silver lace design of the planetary system—the badge of my rank—on my left sleeve. A uniform pleasing to the eye, though I say it myself.

The two stood a little part after that, ignoring me for the moment as was the custom, while the port chief, or his deputy examined Hume's papers. I put in the interval talking to Jansca, and I noticed that once or twice Tambard's eye strayed over our way, and his brow furrowed as though he saw something he did not quite understand.

The port authority moved back; Hume handed the initialed papers to the purser, and for the moment there was a pause. Then Tambard crooked his little finger to me.

"Sanders," he said when I came, "we must talk things over. No, not here on the ship, but on Gaudien. I think you have much to tell us that was hinted at in your report. You mentioned others whose words would support your conclusions. Is Hume one?"

"He is one," I agreed.

Mercury or Pluto?

TAMBARD looked at me curiously, and a light flickered for a moment in the depths of his piercing eyes. A strange man this, not one with whom I would care to be at cross-purposes.

"And the other? She?"

He made the slightest motion of his head in Jansca's direction, and I could swear that a smile curved the corners of his mouth. It was gone so quickly that a moment later I was not sure I had seen it at all.

"She," I said, striving to hold my voice so that it would not betray me, "she, sir, is the other."

"Who is she?" The question was rapped out.

"One Jansca Dirka, the daughter of a director of the Canal Company of Mars," I answered. "She also," I added, "and this, sir, is the more important in my eyes, is my affianced and my invaluable assistant."

Tambard's eyes twinkled then, though I wondered if after all her father's position had anything to do with the softening of his manner towards me. Afterwards I learned better, for even then I did not know my Tambard well.

His eyes still twinkling, Tambard turned to Clinigo. "There seems some magic in these Earth-men, Clinigo," he said, "that in a few short days one of them can not only win a Martian maiden, but can fire her with his own spirit, so that she can qualify for an honorary membership of the Guard."

Ah! Then he had read between the lines of my message, condensed though it was. What a man!

Clinigo smiled a little. I think he was not very interested in us, save in so far as the information we had to give concerned him and his office.

"An apt helpmate, I should think," he said.

Tambard shrugged. I often wondered in the days that followed if there was any possibility of friction between the pair, but luckily for the Planets it never came to that. The interests at stake were far too great for them to be swayed this way or that by any personal animus.

"Ah, well," said Tambard. "This conference now. . . ." He touched me lightly on the arm, and beckoned Hume and Jansca to come with us. It was symptomatic of the man that he did not address my lady, merely giving her the slightest, gravest, inclination of the head as an acknowledgement of her presence.

Jansca walked between me and Hume, with Tambard on my right—this was once we crossed the gangway and emerged on Gaudien—but Clinigo kept a little way ahead, as though he had sufficient to interest him in communing with his own thoughts. I, for one, foresaw trouble ahead of us when it came to mentioning the matter of the Oxcta, for where that was concerned Clinigo would be more of an outsider even than I had been.

But in life—one must record—the anticipated difficulties always vanish when one comes to face them. It is those to which no one has given a thought that most often cause trouble.

Tambard apparently was using with Clinigo the room of an officer in command as an office. At least I saw there, when we came to it, many gadgets that were not usual, and some of which bore traces of having been hurriedly affixed and quite recently.

The Martian motioned us to seats, but surprisingly it was Hume who first broke the silence.

"My ship and the passengers, sir. . . .?" he queried.

"Are safe," said Tambard. "The passengers will not get into mischief, for they will not be allowed to land. It, is scarcely worth while. All of you will be on your way to Tlanan again before thirty of your Earth minutes have passed."

Good news, I thought. After all it would not have been pleasant to have been ordered back to duty then and there, leaving Jansca to go on to Mars, with no sure prospect of meeting again soon.

Then a sudden doubt assailed me. Was Tambard including me in what he said? I would dearly have liked to have asked him and cleared the matter up at once, but I did not dare.

He produced a paper and placed it on the table. Either it was my message or a duplicate, as I presently discovered. He addressed himself first to me.

"Start from the moment of sailing," he said, "and tell us all that has the slightest bearing on the case."

I did. I told him everything, suppressing only those matters of purely private concern which had transpired between Jansca and myself. And, of course, seeing Clinigo was present, I mentioned nothing of that purely Martian secret, the Oxcta pellets.

Both members of the Council listened attentively to the end, when Clinigo spoke for the first time.

"An admirable exposition," he remarked. "Even more admirable is the fact that despite its condensation you have been able to add little of material value to your message." He gestured towards the paper in Tambard's hand.

Again I felt myself flushing. Not for many a day had I had so much praise given me.

TAMBARD sat silent and thoughtful, his fingers drumming noiselessly on the table-top in front of him.

"An odd situation," he said at last. "Frankly—we can all be outspoken here and know that nothing goes beyond the walls of this room—we don't quite know what to make of it all. If an attack had been made on any of our ships we would know what to expect. But so far nothing of the kind has occurred. The only bloodshed, the only destruction achieved rests at our door. Or yours rather." He looked towards the three of us.

"One moment," I spoke. "That explosion, when the stranger ship flew to pieces, to my mind throws a side-light on things. I reason it was the ignition of high explosives that caused her end. And, I'd say, those high explosives, be their nature whatever it was, were intended for a purpose."

"I agree. Your reasoning is perfectly correct," said Tambard coolly. "But what you say does not affect my contention, that these explosives were not used against our ships. Your space-visitors—we must call them that for want of a better name—boarded each ship they came to, and seemingly left it in the state they found it. At least they caused no harm. The obvious conclusion is that they boarded it for purposes of examination."

"Infusoria under the microscope." For the life of me I could not help using that century-and-a-half-old phrase of Wells.

Tambard looked puzzled, so I explained the allusion, delicately, of course, for "The War of the Worlds" as a book is ever a sore point with your Martian. He can never quite get over the fact, to him, that we Tellurians once pictured him as the repulsive beast of the cylinders.

"Quite so," said Tambard when he had grasped what I meant. "Yet that is not altogether true. I would agree without reservation if we seemed to be dealing with vastly higher intelligences than our own. They are using forces of whose existence, and of many of whose methods of application we are already aware. Even the method by which they paralyze the ship's complement is not altogether a mystery. Given time our scientists can puzzle it out."

"The point," said Clinigo, "is that we may not be given time. Tambard, why are we being studied?"

"Our ships? It may merely be in a spirit of scientific curiosity, though I doubt that. Most probably we are dealing with spies. But what in the stars they wish to know and what they intend to do when they've learned it, passes our comprehension."

"In the message I received," I interposed, "there was a phrase referring to a menace to the Universe."

Tambard's face went grave. "That is so," he agreed. "I was responsible for that. It was my suggestion, but Clinigo here agreed with me, and Harran is already of the same opinion. Since the trouble first arose, we have been in constant communication with him in your New York."

"May I ask a question?" It was Jansca who spoke, and Tambard nodded.

"What is it you wish to know?" he said.

"I'm not sure that any can tell me," she said daringly, "but I should imagine that we might arrive at some more definite conclusion about the menace we may have to face if we knew with whom we are to deal. Can you suggest from where the space-visitors are likely to have come?"

"I can hazard two guesses," said Tambard. "One is that they come from beyond our solar system, but that I am reluctant to credit. The nearest potentially inhabitable planet of any extra-solar system is too many light-years away."

"And your other guess?" I said as he paused.

"That they come from our own system."

"But where from?" Clinigo exclaimed with an odd note of surprise in his voice.

"We can narrow that down to definable limits by a process of elimination," the Martian returned. "They do not come from Tlanan, Venus or Tellus, of that we can be certain. The major planets—such as are inhabited—possess no peoples so far advanced in space-navigation. There remain to be considered then but two possible planets, the outermost and the innermost."

"Pluto and Mercury!" I exclaimed.

"Exactly," said Tambard. "Of Pluto we know little, of Mercury even less. One is too far from the Sun, and the other too near it to allow observations to be made of them with any degree of accuracy, and so far we have found no explorers daring enough to visit either."

"Of the two I would favor Mercury more," I told him. And when he looked questioningly I explained what I had learned of Nomo Kell. Apparently he had not paid so much attention to that part of my story. Now I stressed the point, particularly what Parey had told me about the argument over the condition of Mercury in which Nomo Kell had flatly declared the others did not know what they were talking about. Tambard

admitted now that there were strong possibilities in favor of my suggestion being correct.

"There is always the possibility," he said thoughtfully. "I wonder if we could learn anything from the body."

"The dead space-visitor we kept on the *Cosmos?*" Hume queried.

"Yes," said Tambard. "Only he's not on the *Cosmos* now, but down in the laboratories. Our scientists. . . ."

He stopped abruptly. "Excuse me," he said,

(*Illustration by Paul*)

The thing with which we had nearly collided was a coal black world of darkness and desolation.

and turned and whispered something to Clinigo. I saw Clinigo nod. The tail of a sentence drifted to me. ". . . . better if you went, no doubt. You can use your eyes."

Again Clinigo nodded, and rose to his feet. He sauntered to the door and passed through. Tambard turned to me.

"Clinigo and I agreed," he said with a curious half-smile that held a slight ironic quality, "that it would be well if he went down to the laboratories and had a look about himself. He can use

his eyes; he is trained to observation of that sort" —was there a slight emphasis on the last two words?—"and may see something that has escaped the observation of others."

"Oh," I said, and was beginning some remark or other when Tambard silenced me with a gesture.

"Someone here has something to say that had better be said before Clinigo returns," he stated.

I gasped. For Tambard had looked meaningly towards Jansca.

CHAPTER XV

The New Command

"I HAVE," said Jansca simply, yet with emphasis.

I stared at her, then turned to Tambard. Somehow, during the course of conversation, a word, a sign must have passed between them, something that a Martian alone could understand. What it was I could not say. I had seen nothing, heard nothing that did not carry its intrinsic meaning on the surface. But then I had to admit that I was by no means infallible.

"Speak on," Tambard advised her. "Time is short."

"It's only this," she said hurriedly, "though it's rather important. The reason why Jack"—she nodded towards me—"and I were not stupefied when those people boarded the *Cosmos* is that we'd each had some Oxcta not long before."

"So that's it," said Tambard gravely. "I thought from the mention of emergency suits as a temporary measure"—he was referring to a line in my message—"that there was something more to come. But what it was I could not guess. But. . .Oxcta!"

He looked from me to Hume, and the latter colored.

"I'm afraid," he said apologetically, "that the fault was mine. I gave it to Sanders."

Tambard stared at him a space, and then his stern face relaxed.

"You have the right to carry it, of course," he said. "You've acquired that right because of your wife. . .a Tlanaman lady. You also have the right to exercise your discretion as to whom you should offer it. So far so good."

He turned easily to Jansca. "You had your own supply, I suppose?" he said, as though it were something he took for granted.

Jansca slowly shook her head. "I got mine from Jack," she said simply.

"Ah." Tambard's eyes came round to me. This time there was a glow in their depths, a hardening of the jaw and a tightening of the lines about the mouth that I did not altogether like. "And you got it from. . .? he demanded.

Hume pulled himself upright in his seat. "From me," he said. "I used my discretion."

For one long second Tambard brooded over us. I think he was not pleased with Hume's explanation, yet I fancy he did not quite know what to say in the circumstances. But again Jansca saved the situation.

"I don't think there's any question about the rights or wrongs of the case," she said with a touch of indignation in her voice. "Jack is perfectly entitled to Oxcta, if he wants, even more so than Captain Hume."

"He has not yet married a Martian wife," Tambard reminded her, ever so gently I thought.

"But"—Jansca's voice quivered a little as though she found the rest hard to say—"but he is of the blood. . .a Sonjhon!"

Hume uttered a wordless exclamation and stole a curious glance at her. Tambard stared at her long and thoughtfully while a man could count ten, and I waited, wondering what outburst was coming now.

"You did that?" he said with a note of perfect amazement in his voice. "You thought enough of him for that?"

"I thought more," she asserted. "I would do it again. But"—her voice faltered—"I did not expect so soon to have to make it known."

Tambard sighed. "Perhaps it is just as well," he said softly, "just as well I mean that I know now. It may simplify matters considerably. However, dismiss this matter of the Oxcta from your minds for the present. I'll attend to all that it implies. But the thought that has come to me is this: Will you take over a new command, Sanders?"

I hesitated. A command of a Martian Guardship fleet, temporary though it might be, was not a thing lightly to be undertaken. Even had I been a free agent I would have debated before accepting. As it was even though on vacation I was still attached to the Earth service. True, the Interplanetary Guards were looked on as a sort of international body, nevertheless we were recruited according to our planets and we were theoretically at least under the orders of our planetary Council chief.

"There's nothing I'd like better," I said at last, "but I can't decide of myself without Harran's permission."

"And if Harran gives permission?" said Tambard purringly.

"In that case I am at your disposal."

"Harran has already given it," said Tambard. "Even if he hadn't, in case of emergency Clinigo and I could override his decision, a thing we would not willingly do. But he has. . .he will instruct you to place yourself at our disposal."

I think I must have looked some of the chagrin I felt. Duty tugged me one way; the thoughts of my interrupted holiday and what the company of Jansca meant drew me the other.

Tambard looked up at me thoughtfully. "Still," he said, "unless the unexpected happens you will not be required immediately. I would suggest you resume your interrupted voyage to Tlanan in the *Cosmos*—it might not be wise to follow your original intention and proceed to Venus—and wait there for orders, or developments, whichever come first."

"I shall do that," I said stiffly. A holiday of this sort with the hourly prospect of having to part from Jansca at a moment's notice was not so inviting as it seemed at first glance.

"A pity," he said musingly, "that you are not mated. It would solve many difficulties. If the emergency is great enough we may yet be com-

pelled to revive the ancient custom of picking our best, whether they be men or women."

"And if we were mated," Jansca asked interestedly, "what difference would it make?"

"I could give you place with your lord on his ship as second in command," Tambard said steadily. "It is no new thing. You are too young yourself to remember the old custom, but I. . . ."

He stopped abruptly, and the eyes clouded. It was then I realized how old a man Tambard must be. If truth be told he was well into his second century for these Martians live longer than we on the average. Then he would remember, might even have participated in those wars that twenty or thirty years before the coming of the Earth-men to the Red Planet had welded the Martians into one nation. Stay, wasn't there some story—dimly recalled—of his having lost his wife in that conflict? That must be what he was thinking of.

"I will take that place then," Jansca announced with decision. "That is"—abruptly she remembered that I had not been consulted and she dropped her eyes—"if my lord is willing."

The formal humility invested her offer with a certain sanctity. Couched in that fashion one could not refuse it without giving offence. Yet for once I felt that I must run counter to the customs of her land.

"Jansca," I said, "I'm an Earth-man and I'm not so conversant with your ways as I might be, so that must be my excuse if I say anything you think I should not say. You're a dear to make such a suggestion, and I'd jump at it if it wasn't for the risk."

"What risk?" she asked.

"The risk you would run if you came with me, if it is necessary I should go."

"The risk you would run yourself?"

"That is different."

"The difference," she said slowly, "is that with you I would be sharing in your danger. I would know what it was and realize how little it mattered after all, and if the worst come to the worst we would share more than risk together. But if I did not come I should have to remain—no, not at home, for it would not be home without you—at Tlanan, and eat out my heart with anxiety.

"Imagining all sorts of things, conjuring up a new fear every second, dying a new death every hour of the day and night. Can't you see"—she turned on me almost fiercely, oblivious in her emotions, of the others watching us—"can't you see that I would be happy with you, mad with anxiety, sick with fear and worry away from you."

I placed my hand on her shoulder, and gently pressed her back into her seat.

"Tambard Mitaka*", I said formally, "Jansca Dirka will, as my mate, take second command."

Tambard inclined his head in acknowledgment. "It is carved in stone," he said, using the phrase that to a Martian means a decree is unalterable."

Jansca gave me one look, caught my hand and pressed it in her own. Not a word did she say, yet look and action were eloquent.

"Sensible man," came in a rumble from Hume.

Accident or chance, call it what you will, had timed it all nicely. Another second or so and the door opened and Clinigo entered. Tambard looked up, alert and businesslike again.

CLINIGO came in moodily and resumed his seat. I took it from his expression that he had not been as successful as he had hoped.

"What is the result?" Tambard asked.

Clinigo made a tiny fluttering motion—curiously bird-like—with his hands.

"I went. I looked. I saw," he said, "and I confess that I am baffled. He is like no man of any of the planets I have ever seen. In height he might be a Martian, yet. . . ."

Tambard laughed. "He is not a Martian, that much is certain," he declared. "But I interrupted you. Speak on, friend Clinigo."

Clinigo gave an odd little shiver as though the memory of the stranger had stirred unpleasant thoughts in his mind.

"A ridge of horny substance across the head, and purple eyes," he said as though talking to himself. "No one has ever seen such a being alive."

"Nomo Kell," I said quickly. "I told you of him."

Clinigo nodded. "So you did," said Tambard. "Yet Nomo Kell was posing as a Martian."

"Of twenty years residence," I reminded him.

"About the time we were getting used to you Earth-men and your strange divergences of racial types," Tambard said thoughtfully. "Interplanetary travel had just become popularized then. We were astounded at the types that were coming from Earth to visit us.

"It would have been comparatively easy then for such a man as Nomo Kell to have taken up residence and qualified for citizenship. But perhaps if we get his prints and see where they were issued we may be able to trace back. Someone must have sponsored him, otherwise he could not have taken out papers. If we can trace that person we may get at some solution."

He stood up. "Clinigo," he said, "I think we may be needed more on our respective planets than here. I, for my part, will repair to Mars by the *Cosmos*. I do not want to detail a Guard-ship to take me back. It may be wanted here yet. And you?"

Clinigo smiled, a little sadly I thought. "Your suggestion is good," he said. "I, too, will come on the *Cosmos*. It is to make Shangun on its return trip and should get me home without undue delay. But one thing I would suggest, and that is that while the *Cosmos* is stopping over at Tlanan it should take on extra armament purely as a precautionary measure."

"I thought," I said, perhaps unwisely, "that it was intended to call in all space-ships."

"It was," Tambard answered. "But we have reconsidered that since receiving your report. You have shown us a method of combatting them, where before we had none. Also we have decided that there is nothing to be gained by calling all ships in and starting a panic. By clearing

*Mitaka: a formal title of respect. Its nearest equivalent in English would be "One who is most noble and most wise."

the void of traffic we might be playing into the hands of these space visitors. Every ship between worlds now is a potential scout and newsgatherer. Besides the Guard-ships are on the alert, and will keep the traffic lanes as well patrolled as they can. Still it is for every captain to say for himself whether he will take the risk."

He turned to Hume.

The latter smiled wryly. "You needn't worry about me," he answered. "Speaking for myself I'm willing to sail the *Cosmos* through space till further orders."

It was characteristic of Tambard that he merely nodded.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Red Planet

MARS glowed ahead in the void, and grew rapidly. Those of us to whom it meant the end of the voyage sighed with relief; what those others who had yet to make Shangun in Venus thought of matters I cannot say. The only one of them I really cared about, Hume himself, assured me he was not worrying.

Why should he, he said. We others, who claimed to know, regarded the space-visitors as a distinct menace, perhaps a deadly foe. So far, experience had shown that they were merely an unmitigated nuisance, upsetting schedules, causing all sorts of inconvenience, yet actually doing no damage.

I fancy he had a hope that perhaps, before it was time for him to resume his voyage, things would have advanced so far that all commercial vessels would be warned out of space, and only the fighting machines allowed to take off.

For my part, but for the serious fashion in which Tambard seemed to regard the future, I would have felt inclined to agree with Hume's summing-up. Until the space-visitors committed a definitely hostile act we could hardly regard them as open enemies.

Meanwhile the *Cosmos* had become to all intents and purposes a Guard-ship. Tambard and Clinigo with my assistance had taken over control, and one or another of us three was constantly in the transmission room. Messages were coming over thick and fast, and Harran was beginning to warm up the ether with his suggestions. If Mercury were the abode of these intelligences we had encountered Venus and Earth, as being nearer the Sun, were likely to be attacked in that order. Mars would come last of the three.

The main Martian space observatory, which had been established on Chimos, one of the many asteroids or minor planets in the belt between Mars and Jupiter, had received orders to concentrate all observations on Pluto, the outermost of the planets. No reports had yet come in, but somehow we all felt that nothing would be discovered in that direction. The balance of probability leaned towards Mercury as being the world from which the trouble would come.

It was the business of the Venusian astronomers, however, to keep that planet under observation. As its nearest neighbor they should be best able to obtain results. Not that we hoped for anything startling or even decisive. Mercury has always been an elusive planet as far as observation is concerned; its nearness to the Sun had rendered study of its surface by telescope a matter of considerable difficulty, and no spaceship captain has yet been found venturesome enough to conduct an expedition in person.

It seemed high time, however, that one or other of the various planetary bureaus devoted to this sort of thing should call for volunteers. After all what does the sacrifice of a few lives matter compared with the safety of the Universe?

Our landing at Tlanan took place early in the morning, though already the heat in the thin Martian atmosphere, thin compared with Earth, was beginning to be almost overpowering. Yet when all is said and done it is a dry enough heat, easier to stand than the humidity of Venus. And if the air does seem attenuated to our ideas, the extra oxygen content, once one gets used to it, makes up the deficiency to a degree.

To prevent regrettable accidents we were all passed through air-locks and gradually accustomed to the differences in atmospheric pressure, and it was quite an hour from the time of our landing before we set foot on Martian soil. Tlanan I had seen many times before, and always there is something new about the city to charm the eye.

Built beside one of the main canals of the planet's system it has been so constructed and toned that it seemed part of the landscape, a landscape that in many ways is reminiscent of Earth scenery in Egypt. All these Martian cities are what one might call dual-purpose constructions, for they are built to be comfortable both by night and by day, very necessary when one considers the great variation of temperature one encounters there in the Martian equivalent of our twenty-four hour Earth day.

Despite the thickness of my emergency coat I have almost frozen before dawn, while an hour later I have been compelled to change to the thinnest of clothing to avoid being baked. Yet it must not be imagined that this great variation in temperature makes so great a difference in the long run. One adjusts one's self to it gradually, and several hundreds of years of Martian scientific invention has resulted in supplying all sorts of mitigating gadgets that not only make the climate bearable, but actually enjoyable.

I had made no particular arrangements as to where I was to go. Ordinarily I would either have remained on the *Cosmos* during her stay in port or else have taken quarters at one of the various hostels run by the Interplanetary Tourist Bureau. I think it was with some idea now of doing the latter that I gathered up my meager baggage, and looked about for some means of transport. I had had no trouble with the immigration section at all,—as one of the Guards I was free of all such vexatious proceedings.

THE examination was not done so much for revenue, but for medical precautions. Each planet has its own prohibitions against substances that for one reason or other may not be brought

in except under strict supervision. And each planet has its own problem to face in fighting and keeping out imported diseases.

The examination over, I had, as I have said, gathered my belongings together and was casting about for transport when Jansca detached herself from the crowd and came towards me.

"I've been looking for you," she said, "and wondering what had happened to you. I was afraid you might have strayed off, or done something foolish."

She spoke with a glow in her eyes and a heightened color that made her in my estimation look lovelier than ever.

"Foolish?" I echoed with a laugh. "What do you mean by that?"

She did not answer that directly. "Where are you going to stay?" she queried.

I shifted a trifle uneasily. "At one of the hostels, "I told her. "My purse won't run to anything more opulent."

"You foolish person, you utterly irresponsible Earth-man!" she cried. "Don't you know that there is only one place in all Mars where you can stop?"

"No," I said with a faint touch of alarm. Just what did she mean? Was this some new regulation, only recently promulgated, of which I had not heard? "Where, Jansca, where is that?"

She slipped her arm through mine.

"Where?" she echoed. "Where but with us?"

I drew back. "I don't think I should. . .The trouble. . . ."

Her face clouded. "Our conventions are not yours, I know, Jack," she said slowly, "but if you wish to give a Sonjhon a deadly insult refuse his offer of hospitality."

"My dear, I did not mean it that way. You know. But I did not wish to be a source of trouble and inconvenience to you."

She bent swiftly and brushed my lips with hers.

"Your habit of kissing," she said softly, "is the sweetest thing that Earth has taught to Mars. No, my dear, you will cause no trouble and no inconvenience by coming with us, nothing like as much as you would if you stayed elsewhere, and I had to seek you every day."

She dropped her voice to a whisper and drew the closer to me. "Jack," she said tremulously, "time may be short for us. The sooner we are mated the longer we will have to ourselves. Father and I have talked the matter over. It can be arranged with little or no delay."

I nodded, my heart too full for words. It was what I wanted most in life, and the one thing I was dubious of suggesting. But now that she had spoken, my mind was at ease. Anyway this was a time when most conventions would have to go by the board.

"That's settled then," she said firmly, and turning, beckoned. For the first time I noticed that her father had been standing back well out of earshot, obediently waiting, great man though he was, until his masterful daughter had said her say and brought me to her way of thinking. I'm sure he guessed from the expression on our faces, what had transpired, but he asked no questions.

His and Jansca's baggage made a formidable heap beside my puny lot, and I was wondering how we would set about removing it when a robot—or, to give him his Martian name, a Toro—appeared. Much of the menial labor on the planet is done by these mechanical men, though to give them their due the average Martian is not backward in putting his shoulder to the wheel when the necessity arises.

Dirka spoke into the televox apparatus situated in the Toro's metal diaphragm, giving his orders that were picked up by an exceedingly sensitive selenium cell which in some very ingenious fashion operated the mechanism.

The Toro picked up as much of the baggage as he could conveniently carry in his metal hands, and unerringly led the way through the exit doors of the building to the duralmac road outside. A small battery car just large enough to hold the three of us and our luggage was standing outside. I wondered at the time how it had arrived there without a driver, but I learnt later that it had been brought in on tow the previous night by one of the transport companies that arrange such matters for returning travelers.

We got in, the Toro made another trip for the rest of the baggage, packed it in the luggage boot at the rear, and then with a look of almost human enquiry on his metal face turned to Dirka. The latter spoke again into the voice box; something clicked inside the Toro and he turned and marched back into the building.

Dirka took the wheel, while Jansca nestled in between us, and soon we were speeding along the duralmac track* at a pace that well-nigh took my breath away. In the void, curiously enough, speeds approaching that of light do not seem to matter. One has no air friction with which to contend and nothing other than the dials by which to judge the rate at which one is being hurled forward. But here on the planet's surface with ground and air friction as a constant reminder of speed a hundred miles or so an hour seemed perfectly appalling.

THE ride lasted only a matter of twenty minutes. We pulled up outside a pleasant little house, beautifully shaded by dilium* trees, and with a slope at the rear to the sparkling waters of the Great Canal. A few launches floated on the canal's smooth surface, pleasure boats, the only form of water travel that the Martian knows on his own oceanless world.

Probably that explains why every Martian who can muster the fare—and there are few who cannot—makes at least one trip to Earth, where he spends as much time as he can on the sea. Indeed I have heard it said that if it were not for our Interplanetary tourists, terrestrial ocean travel—in these days of fast flying—would no longer be a paying proposition. I can well believe it.

Dirka's wife, of course, was no longer living. I would have guessed that from the first even if I had not been told so by Jansca, for no Martian of the upper classes ever travels without his

*Duralmac track—a road made of a combination of rubber, glass and metal, which, as its name implies lasts almost for ever.

*Dilium—a Martian fruit-bearing tree with six inch leaves of a marvelous waxen pink color. The fruit grows to the size of an Earth cocoanut and is remarkably like our peach in flavor.

family if it can possibly be avoided. There were only servants in the house, lower class people who did a good deal of the light work, while the rougher jobs were attended to by the Toros. It was a Toro who met us at the entrance and brought in our luggage, and another Toro, of a more highly specialized type, took the car round to some sort of garage.

Jansca disappeared as soon as we entered the house with the intimation that she would see me at nondal, the local equivalent of our lunch, leaving it to her father to conduct me to my rooms. My apartments were three in all, a bedroom, a sort of study and sitting room combined with the walls lined with shelves containing book-machines, and a private bathroom. I learnt later that in most private houses each set of apartments has its own bathroom.

"You may want to bathe after your journey," Dirka remarked as he showed me the bathroom. "You may use it as much as you wish, you understand, providing you do not draw the water from the canal. That is kept solely for culinary purposes."

"Where then," I said, "on this planet where water must be at a premium do you get enough to be so lavish in your bathrooms?"

Dirka laughed softly, that almost inaudible throaty Martian laugh.

"Here," he said, pointing to two cylinders which stood side by side over the bath. "You will find there all the water you need."

They looked curiously like gas cylinders to me, and I bent forward to look at the wording on the plate of each. It was in Martian characters, however, which I have never learned to read.

"You do not know our language?" Dirka asked. "No? Well, this"—he pointed to one cylinder—"is hydrogen and that is oxygen. They are recombined to form water, and the process is automatically regulated. I had better show you how to do it."

From each cylinder a long flexible pipe protruded, and the mouth of each Dirka inserted into holes in a box-like contrivance that was clamped to one end of the bath. He turned a screw on each cylinder, and I became aware of a gentle hissing sound that presently ceased. In a very few seconds a thin stream of crystal clear water began to pour out of a spout attached to the box-like contrivance.

"You see?" said Dirka, reversing the screws, and stopping the recombination of the elements. "You can alter the pressure, make the stream larger or smaller according to your requirements, by turning those screws little or much. Now, I shall leave you to clean and rest after your journey. Nondal will be in six persts, that is an hour and a half of your Earth time. Then we can talk of the matters we would like to discuss."

He left me.

I enjoyed the bath, the first that I had been able to have since leaving Earth. This artificial water however seemed to lack something I was used to. Say what we will, no synthetic product, no matter how chemically correct is its method of manufacture, can quite equal the work of nature.

Nevertheless there was a freshening quality in the bath that made me feel rest was out of the question, or perhaps it was the difference in gravity here gave me the feeling of greater energy. At any rate I found myself with time to spare on my hands, and very little inclination to pass it away in sleep. For want of something to do I strolled into the study and sitting room and began to examine the book-machines.

In reality they were reels of fine wire which when run through a machine specially made for the purpose told the story with voices suitable to the characters. One could too, if one wished, by pressing a button on one side of the machine, set a series of synchronized pictures moving that added to the verisimilitude of the story.

I may be a little old-fashioned in some ways, but I have never taken altogether to the book machines. A story, after all, is not all dialogue, neither is it all acting, and one misses that literary touch that flares up so often in the old print books. The march of progress has brought us many fine and wonderful things, but I think that against it must be counted the undeniable fact that it has deprived us of much that is good and beautiful.

I was feeling more or less at a loose end, and wondering—for I was not quite sure how the act would be regarded in a Martian household—whether I should light my pipe, when someone knocked on the door.

I opened it to find Jansca waiting there for me.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Calm Before the Storm

FOR the moment I fancied she was the bearer of evil tidings, but one look at her smiling face drove the idea from my mind.

"I hope," she said, almost breathlessly, "that you don't mind my coming to see you? You weren't resting? If I thought that. . . ."

"I wasn't," I declared. "Somehow I don't feel tired now. I was wondering how I was going to pass the time."

"Then," she breathed, "I'm glad I come. Can I come in?"

"Certainly."

She entered, shut the door behind her, and ran her eye round the room.

"So you've been looking at the book machines," she said. "You won't find much there. What a pity you don't know our language."

"I do in a way," I told her. "I can understand what's being said to me, but read it I cannot. The characters puzzle me."

"Of course." She nodded. "All communications are made in a sort of common language, aren't they?"

"That's so," I agreed smiling. I had an idea what was coming; women all the worlds over are still curious.

"What is it? What is it called?" she asked with a touch of disinterestedness in her voice.

"That, Jansca mine, is a secret that, since I am under bond, I cannot tell even to you. Some day soon when you receive your appointment I can make it plain to you, but not till then."

She looked at me with grave eyes. "I'd be the last to try and persuade you to be false to that bond," she said soberly. "I did not know, else I would not have asked. Yet it was not mere idle curiosity that prompted me. It was the wish to share in all your knowledge in the hope that I might be able to take some of the work off your shoulders."

"I know," I said gently. "I would impute no other motive to you, Jansca." A thought struck me. "Has further word of any sort come through on the news-machines?"

She shook her head slowly. "None as yet," she said in a strained voice. "But I fear that this is merely the calm before the storm. Our time grows short, we must make the most of it."

"When. . .?" I was beginning, then stopped, or I was not quite sure how to phrase my question. These Martians call things by other terms than we are used to.

She must have read my thoughts. "When can we be mated?" she said. "That is what you wished to know?"

"Yes, Jansca. The sooner the sweeter to my way of thinking, though I have no wish to rush you."

"Rush me?" She looked prettily puzzled for the moment, then the meaning of it dawned on her. "You mean hurry me? You could never do that in this matter. I am too unmaidenly anxious, so unlike your Earth-girls. You must think me odd, more than odd, in that."

I caught her in my arms and drew her to me. "I think you are adorable," I said. "You girl of another world who has brought love into mine. But you have not answered the question."

"A day then, perhaps two," she said. "My father must be judge of that, and I would not run counter to his wishes. If they should differ from mine, maybe I can bring him to see eye to eye with me."

"I really believe you can," I said glowingly. "And if it should fall out in that fashion what time have your wishes set as the day?"

"No day can be too soon," she said seriously. "Shameless, am I not? Shameless for love of you, dear one. But even then it is not merely our own happiness of which I think, but the fate of worlds. Who knows but that the destiny of the Universe may be knit up with the course of our love? You and I together, mayhap, can work miracles."

"It is questionable," I said grimly, "whether they are the sort of miracles that might stem the tide of invasion."

"You do not know," she said softly with a light in her eyes. "My father. . .there are things you will be told. . .I should not tell you now. . ." She spoke hurriedly, ending incoherently, as though she were afraid her tongue might betray her into breaking confidences.

"Yes?" I said encouragingly if thoughtlessly.

"I cannot tell you. Don't press me," she begged breathlessly. "But there are secret matters. My father, as head of the Canal Company, of a surety knows. I guess. . .his secret and Mars'."

Somewhere in the distance a bell tinkled softly, a faint silvery note that brought us back to the immediate present with a jerk.

"Nondal hour," she exclaimed. "So soon. How time has passed."

She glanced in the mirror, woman to the last, passed herself as presentable, then took my arm. She drew me down the spacious hall to the room where the meal was served. Dirka was waiting for us, and his face lit up with smiles as he saw us coming, our arms linked, and our faces afire with happiness.

THAT Martian meal lingers in my memory, will linger perhaps long after most other things have faded. It was the setting and the company that made it memorable, though the course of it for the greater part followed the prescribed ritual. For that reason I prefer not to describe it in detail. Though I write primarily for readers of my own planet, even for those who have not crossed the void the ritual will by no means be novel. Travelled Earth-writers have described such similar meals *ad nauseam*.

Our conversation came round by insensible degrees to the matter uppermost in the minds of us all, the possibility of invasion. A little to my surprise Dirka was not inclined to scout the idea. He merely remarked that it had happened before and would doubtless happen again, but that he knew of no recorded case where the invaders, even with superior science at their disposal, had managed to establish themselves for any length of time in the conquered country.

"What planet are you talking about?" I queried.

"All of them, I suppose I had better say," he answered with a smile, "but of Venus I cannot be sure. But both Mars and Earth have had their visitations."

"From what planets?" I asked with interest.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Who knows?" he said. "The very fact of these invasions is buried under the litter of history. Perhaps the invaders came from some world in intergalactic space. It is hard to say."

"But," I persisted, "if you know so little of that side of it, how can you be sure that actually there have been invasions?"

"Legend. Folk-lore. Fairy tales even." He met my eyes with a smile in his. "Your own Earth legends are full of such things. The indications are there to a thoughful reader, and, without boasting, I can claim to have studied them deeply. That has been my hobby these many years, the interpretations of many of your various races' so-called myths in the light of this theory. I can give you two instances at least."

"What are they?" I begged. "I'd dearly like to know."

"You have a country on your Earth in the continent called Asia, a land sometimes referred to as the Celestial Empire, though it has been a republic for over a hundred of your years."

"China," I said. "Go on."

"Did not their old Emperors call themselves the Sons of Heaven? That may or may not be of value in the last analysis; at any rate I shall not linger on it. But the legends of that land are

full of tales of dragons, monstrous flying things, breathing fire and smoke and pouring destruction on the country."

"The myths of our countries have references to them too," I pointed out.

"I should be surprised if they had not," he answered. "It would be odd to think that any interplanetary invasion was confined merely to one particular country."

"Then these tales of dragons you think have a basis of fact?"

"A basis of remembered incident, more correctly," Dirka said. "What could they be but space-ships?"

"Admitting that, what became of the invaders?"

"Any of a hundred things. They merely made a number of systematic raids, and took their departure. Or perhaps they attempted to settle, and were beaten at last by differing climatic conditions, or disease germs, or various other conditions to which they were not accustomed. Some of them may even have survived, have married into an alien tribe and carried on some of their culture and attainments.

"Your histories are full of stories of races that have little in common with their neighbors, that still preserve strange rites and ancient customs, that seem at times as though they have lost a culture that was once theirs."

I thought of the Basques, of the pre-Christian civilization in Ireland, of those isolated cultures scattered throughout ancient America, and I had to admit that what he said was quite feasible.

"Again," he went on, "scarcely a nation, scarcely a race on your planet but has mixed up in its folk-lore strange tales of bright lights in the sky, of visitations impossible to explain by the ordinary laws of Nature as known to these peoples. In the Yucatan province of the Pan-American Union you have deserted cities, thousands of years old in point of time, which look as though their inhabitants deserted them in a body, ran away from some impending catastrophe. A catastrophe that came from the skies. A rain of fire from Heaven." He quoted familiar phrases, and I nodded.

"So much for Earth," I said. "And Mars?"

"Our recorded history goes further back than yours, but we have nothing definite. Only legends. But it is odd that in so many ways so many of our legends should agree with yours, as though they had a common origin."

It was a fascinating subject, as a matter of pure speculation we could have talked about it all day. But there was another matter, one closer to our hearts, that Jansca and I wished her father to discuss with us. Yet we could not break him off abruptly, but must nurse him round by imperceptible degrees until the right word slipped in at the right moment turned the conversation in the desired direction. So gradually we swung the talk past possible invasions to a future probable one, and thus to its immediate bearing on ourselves. I think he saw through our maneuvers, for more than once I caught the flicker of a smile as it sped across his fact, until at last.

"Of course it will make a good deal of difference to everything if such things come to pass in our day," he said thoughtfully. "It will mean that Jansca and you will leave me, when I had hoped to keep you by me."

"We would with your permission be mated before we go," said Jansca demurely. "And, father mine, it is well to bear in mind that the call may come any day at any hour of the day."

"I have thought of that," he said. "I have been pondering on the matter since ever we left Gaudien. I see no ground for delay, since it would bring happiness to no one. As you wish, Jansca daughter and son John. The hour is yours to choose."

SHE rose from her seat, came to her father, put her arm about his neck and kissed him passionately. He looked startled for the moment, then smiled.

"An Earth custom," he said softly, "but a pleasing one, I could wish it had been earlier introduced to our planet."

What more we might have said no one can say, but almost at that moment while we were still feeling our way through a rather awkward pause the communicator wailed. Dirka took up the audiophones and clapped them to his ears, for this was a private set, where conversation and reply could both be kept secret if need be.

He fixed his identity, then listened in silence for a moment before he turned to us with consternation on his face.

"It is Tambard," he said oddly. "He wishes to come right over, as he has a matter of extreme urgency to discuss. Will that do?"

I nodded. "We are at his absolute disposal," "I said with a queer tightening of the heart. . . .

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Storm Breaks

FIVE minutes later Tambard arrived.

We spent the interval in half-affrighted speculation, dreading the possibility of we knew not what. Tambard himself had given no indication to Dirka over the communicator of the nature of the trouble. Beyond the fact of its urgency we could say nothing. Yet the same sense of oppressive foreboding weighed us all down; even Dirka's ageless face seemed of a sudden to have become drawn and haggard.

Tambard was announced. He came through the doorway into the room, and we three with one accord glanced searchingly up at his face as though we could read our fates written there.

I was surprised at the change in him. He had seemed sprightly when I parted from him some hours before; now he looked as though he had spent a sleepless night and a day of care and worry to follow. He took the seat to which Dirka invited him, but declined all offer of food or drink. He had not long since had nondal, he explained. He did not look like it; judging by his appearance he might not have touched food for days.

"All communication with Venus ceased two hours ago," he said deliberately. Out of courtesy to me, it may be recorded, he used Earth-

terms wherever possible right throughout our conversation. "We have been unable to get a message through, and none of the regular calls from there have reached us. I have been in touch with Harran. Some of the Earth stations report having received weak signals, so jammed that no intelligible consecutive message could be read from them. There was something about 'attack' and 'invasion', and that was all."

We looked at each other as he ended, seeing our fears realized, the thing we had dreaded coming to pass.

"But that, from our point of view," Tambard went on, "is not all. I wish it were. Harran and I from our respective planets called up our outermost Guard-ships, where they junction with the Venusian lines. We got a message through to the flag-ship, a general warning it was. We received a flash-back acknowledgment. We issued instructions. They were not acknowledged. There was a silence lasting half an hour during which the headquarters of two planets frantically hurled messages into space. At the end came a reply, only it was not. . . .

"It came, not from the flag-ship, but from a smaller scout on the edge of the fleet. I could give you that message word for word almost, it has so burned into my brain. It ran, 'Can transmit, but cannot receive messages. Receiving apparatus hopelessly damaged in fight. Invisible foe, suddenly descending, wiped out combined Guard-ship fleets before attack could be resisted. *M.10*, sole survivor, transmitting and heading for Gaudien at velocity. (He meant a speed as near to the velocity of light as it was possible to attain.) Will continue to transmit details as long as possible.' "

Tambard paused and again his eyes swept our little circle. "That," he said impressively, "was the last we heard. No further details have come through. If *M.10* does not reach Gaudien soon, we can only conclude that there has been no survivor at all, that that ship's escape was merely a temporary one."

"And in that case," I said startlingly, "God help Gaudien."

"God help Earth and Mars both," said Tambard solemnly.

"Then," said Dirka, "what is there to be done? Must more lives be flung uselessly away?"

"No," said Tambard. "Emphatically no. It is because I have no wish to waste a single life that I have come here. What I say goes no further than the walls of this room?"

"We are used to secret conferences here," Dirka told him.

"So? Then we will hold yet another. Dirka, it is you, through your daughter and her mate here, who may yet save us. We want water, canal water, as much as we can get even if all Mars has to go on thirst rations."

"We'll have to live on the synthetic product if it is necessary to save the planets," Dirka said oddly. "What is it? Atomic power, that you want?"

Tambard nodded. I was frankly puzzled.

"Am I supposed to know?" I asked. "Because if I am to handle this matter I think I should know."

"It is simple," Tambard told me. "We have perfected an atomic weapon. It is a disintegrating ray obtained by breaking up the atomic structure of water. It has been known to the Council for many years, but we hoped we would never have to use it, and we kept the knowledge secret. Now we find we have made little preparation.

"Oh, had we Earth's water power, her oceans here—for salt water is even better than fresh—we could work wonders, but each planet must rely on its own efforts for a start. Later we can join forces, if the God of the Universe should spare us so long. Dirka, write me an order to pump your canals dry if need be."

WITHOUT hesitation the other drew a pad from the pocket of his tunic and in crabbed Martian characters wrote the necessary permission, signing his name and affixing his personal seal at the end as managing head of the Canal Company.

He handed it to Tambard with a wry face.

"It may well be Mars' death warrant," he said queerly.

"And it may not be," Tambard pointed out. "Without it we face certain annihilation. Now"—he turned to me—"I would discuss the rest with you."

Dirka made an abrupt movement. "I shall leave you," he suggested.

"Do nothing of the sort," Tambard insisted. "What we have to say concerns you. I want this young man's help—Mars needs him badly—and a man with divided mind is of no use to anyone. He cannot leave Jansca behind since his thoughts would be on her, not on what he had to face, and he cannot take her even as his second in command unless they are mated."

"Yes?" said Dirka expectantly.

"They may have to go at a moment's notice," Tambard went on.

"I see. So the sooner they are mated the better then," Dirka remarked. He spoke quite easily, calmly, without the slightest trace of hesitation. I, for one, had never expected to get so easily his consent to an immediate mating, the more so as we were of different planets. At the very worst I had steeled myself—despite Jansca's assurances—to accept a counsel of delay that we might be more sure of our feelings towards each other.

But I think Dirka realized the need was desperate, and that, as Tambard said, a man with a divided mind was of no use as a fighting unit. No doubt, too, he knew his daughter well enough to rely on her judgment.

"Good," said Tambard. "We will attend to the details of that in a little moment then. Meanwhile other matters await our attention."

"What," I said bluntly, in the pause that followed, "do you think should be done?"

Tambard made a fluttering movement of his hand. "We are entirely without plans. It is you"—he looked squarely at Jansca and myself—"who will have to do the planning. What can I suggest?"

"Before we get to the point of making sugges-

tions," I answered, "I'd like to have some idea of what I am to command."

"The newest, swiftest space-ship we can find for you," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"If it narrows down to a question of speed and novelty," I remarked, "there's nothing in the known Universe to beat the *Cosmos*. Unfortunately she's a liner."

"Embodying all the latest improvements and built with a purpose," said Tambard. "As you doubtless know this is her trial trip and later she was to be put on an outer planetary schedule. That would involve all sorts of hard work, and the facing of we know not what dangers. She is the last word in space-ships. Also any vessel you took over would have to be fitted out at break-neck speed, and we can fit the *Cosmos* just as well as any other. If you're satisfied with her, we'll commandeer her."

"She's an Earth vessel, registered in New York," I said dubiously.

He waved that objection aside. "The Council have power to commandeer any space-ship in an emergency, no matter what its port of registration may be. The owners already, through Harran, have offered the services of the *Cosmos*."

"Then the *Cosmos* let it be," I agreed. "Now, what surprises have we in store?"

"In the way of armament? Beyond this atomic weapon, none, and even with that I should imagine you'll find it rather difficult fighting an invisible enemy."

"Not altogether invisible," I corrected. "The locators will enable us to position them, and then, of course, the ray tubes. . . ."

Tambard brought his hand down on the table with such a resounding thump that the crockery jumped and rattled.

"The ray, of course!" he exclaimed. "It was that which made them visible. We've got the rate of vibration necessary to counteract their invisibility vibrations. We can rig up projectors—no need to make them lethal—that will nullify the greatest advantage they so far possess over us."

"Can they be rigged up in time?"

"You can't get away before tomorrow's sunset at the earliest. Yes, that will give ample time. We'll put every available man on to the work. Anything more you'd like to suggest?"

"Several things," I said. "I wonder can these projectors be rigged to give higher vibratory rate than is necessary to counteract these invisibility waves? I mean can we have a scale of vibrations up and down which we can play if necessary?"

"It should not be impossible," said Tambard. He made a note on a pad beside him. "What else?"

"A question of diplomacy," I said smiling. "I'll have to have a crew of Martians, because Oxcta will play an important part in the campaign, and it will take you some time to make a solution in such a form that you won't give away the secret of its manufacture to those not entitled to know. But because of that I wonder if there will be any friction due to an Earth-man being in command."

"I see your point," he said with a smile. I think he was genuinely pleased at my suggestion about the Oxcta. It showed him at any rate that I wished to hold inviolate a secret which had come to me by accident. "No, there will be no difficulty over that, particularly since you will have a Martian mate, which makes you Martian by adoption. Only a malcontent would think of raising such a quibble at such a time. But you won't have the handling of malcontents. Your crew will all be picked men."

"Can I make one suggestion then? You'll be bringing the present complement of the *Cosmos* ashore for an indefinite period, but there's one man of her lot I'd sooner have with me as navigator than any other, if so he will come. That's Hume, her present commander."

Tambard nodded. "It can be arranged," he said affably. "That is, if he is willing."

He rose to go. He had said nothing further about our mating, and I thought he had forgotten it, but his next words showed me I had been too hasty in my judgment of him.

"Dirka," he said, "walk a little way with me to the door. I would discuss these young people and how best to help them in the short time at their disposal."

Together they went out, leaving us to ourselves and our troubled thoughts.

I looked moodily across the table to my love.

"Jansca," I said, "there is yet time if you wish to change your mind."

"In what regard?" she asked with a slight frown.

"In any way," I told her. "Now is your last chance to decide whether you wish to come with me on what may well be our last journey. Also it might be well for you to think twice before you marry an Earthman, one of an alien race and with customs alien to you."

For the moment a look of blank horror showed in her eyes, then she got up and came round to me.

"Is it," she asked with a quaver in her voice, "that you no longer love me that you say that?"

"I say it, Jansca," I said unsteadily, "however much it hurts me, because I love you now more than ever."

"That," she said softly, "is all the answer I require. Know, thou foolish Earth-man that I would rather go with you as your mate to death than live in peace, ease and security with any other."

I made the only reply possible in such circumstances. . . .

CHAPTER XIX

The Extra Passengers

OUR mating took place in the late afternoon of that same day. Tambard had been as good as his word, and had speeded up the slow-moving civil machinery to an incredible extent, indeed his dynamic energy seemed to have infused itself, that day, into more than one department of the state.

The ceremony was a quiet one, attended only by Dirka, Tambard himself and the two official witnesses—one of each sex—though it had followed the strict Martian ritual which had not

been varied by a word or phrase for centuries. Our papers signed and handed to us, and our prints taken for purposes of record, we were then free to go about our own affairs until Tambard advised us the *Cosmos* was ready for us.

From the nondal hour of that next day Jansca and I had been holding ourselves at the Council's disposal. Nevertheless, the call came sooner than we expected. All the previous night, beneath the glare and heat of the artificial suns that made the work-shops round the Landing Port as warm and bright as day, the Martian mechanics must have been toiling and slaving. Even with their varied mechanical contrivances to aid them in their work, their task must have been no light one, for when all was said and done they were racing time. In the end they won by a comfortable margin.

It was two hours from nondal, that is about two-thirty in the afternoon in Earth terms when Tambard's call came over the communicator, urging us to repair at once to the Landing Port. We loaded what little baggage we were taking into the back of the car, and with Dirka accompanying us we set out along the duralmac road to headquarters. Orders must have gone forth to give us a clear way, for all traffic ahead of us had been cleared, and we came through without a stop.

At the Landing Port outer gates we showed our official passes, and the three of us were ushered in at once. The huge bulk of the *Cosmos* lay in the slips; beside her stood row on row of glassite tanks that I realized must contain water. From them, through great flexible tubes, the life-blood of Mars was being pumped into the space-ship's containers.

Tambard, Clinigo and a man I did not know were standing by the entrance to the covered gangway that led to the *Cosmos*' main deck. As they saw us the Martian chief started forward. Clinigo, I noticed, hung back. I had not seen him since we had parted when the *Cosmos* docked, and I wondered what he had been doing in the meantime. I had little respect then for the people of Venus, either individually or as a race, and I was not above thinking that the man might be badly frightened. How little I knew of the real facts of the case!

The three of them, greetings between us and Tambard over, preceded us on to the vessel. Hume was waiting for us on the control-deck, his face a trifle paler than usual and his mouth drawn tighter at the corners.

"So it has come to this, Jack?" he murmured as we met." Well, in a way I'm not sorry. You'll find I'll do what you want. I've had my work outlined already"—he gave a nod towards Tambard—"but we can go into it further later."

He stepped back as it seemed Tambard wished to speak to me.

"I've nothing much to add," the Martian said slowly. "You'll head to Gaudien first. They haven't all the necessary apparatus there, but you may find a few ships fitted out ready to accompany you. At least you won't have to go alone. You'll get your reports as long as we can keep in touch with you, and, of course, you'll call us up at the prescribed intervals. Just one word more, take good care of your passengers."

"Passengers?" I echoed in surprise. "I'm not taking any passengers. This is no pleasure trip."

"So I told them," said Tambard, "but they do not agree. Clinigo. . . ."

I interrupted him, swinging on the Venusian. "You don't mean you're coming with us, sir?" I said.

He nodded, a mite shamefacedly. "What else is there left for me to do?" he said sadly. "My planet is in greater danger than either Earth or Mars. For all I know now it may no longer be the Venus I knew, but the spoil of an alien invader. In which case"—he stiffened his thin frame and drew himself up to the last inch of his meager height—"I would crave a chance of helping to pay a little off the score. You understand"—his eyes met mine levelly—"I sail with you not as a member of the Council, but as one under your orders."

"I understand," I said, "and it is well. There can be but one captain on any ship. But the other passenger? Two were mentioned."

Tambard motioned the other man forward. "This," he said to me, "is Arenack, a man not without fame. He will accompany you, and perhaps you may find a use for him."

I looked Arenack over with interest. Of course I had heard of him, for who had not? A scientist of no mean attainments in his day, but of late he seemed to have dropped out of reckoning. I had heard of his name in connection with the atomic structure. If the rumor was correct that would explain why he had disappeared from the public eye, explain, too, why he was coming with us. Well, we would want all the help we could get, scientific and otherwise, if we were to come out of this alive, let alone with whole skins.

I MAY say here that I took a liking to Arenack from the first, despite his many queer little ways. He was a complex character, one hard to understand, and with gusts of anger, alternating with fits of moodiness. Perhaps in his ancestry lay the key to much that was puzzling in him. As he said himself he was an excellent example of the cosmoplanetarian. His mother, born on Mars, had been the child of a Martian man and a Venusian woman, and his father had been a native of Earth. An odd mixture of races, yet one that gave him a peculiar genius.

Tambard had little more to say, indeed there was nothing much in the way of orders he could give me. It was a case where I must rely on my own instinct, more than on set orders.

The Martian shook hands all round, leaving me to the last.

"Go," he said, as he bade me farewell, "go, and the good wishes of the planet go with you. Jansca, bring him back safe and sound."

"Or I do not come myself," she said with dignity. "That, you know, Tambard."

He smiled, I could almost have sworn with relief.

Another moment and all farewells ended the shore-party took their leave, and went off down the gangway.

I called Hume. "See that the gangway is cast off and the ports sealed," I told him. "Signal through to the control-room when that is done."

He saluted me, this friend of mine whose command I had usurped. For there was no rancor in his heart because of our changed positions. The fate of two, perhaps three worlds, might yet depend on us, and in the face of that who could harbor even momentary resentment against a fellow-being?

There seemed some delay in getting the gangway clear, but Jansca who was watching from the little quartzite dome perched on top of the control-room, called down to me that the last of the tanks was just casting loose its pipe, and that was probably the reason for the hold-up.

Evidently she was right, for a moment later the signal came through. I gave the order to clear the slips, and three seconds later there came advice over the televox—for now we were sealed in—that the *Cosmos* was now riding free, and ready for the ascent.

A pressure on a button, the turn of a knob halfway round a graduated scale, a gentle lift, and we were rising slowly through the thin Martian atmosphere.

I watched the dials anxiously, for this business of getting the gravity screens out is always a ticklish affair. A second or so too soon and we would heat up with the friction of the air; a second or so too late, and we would begin to drop, drawn down by the planet's gravity pull.

Once out in space and heading for Gaudien, a flat three-quarters of a million miles away I

(Illustration by Paul)

They came back to consciousness to find themselves prisoners, and their ship in charge of strange beings.

could take things easier, and hand over to Hume. The first thing I did, however, was to call Jansca down from her observation post and in her company made a complete tour of the ship, for I wished to familiarize myself with all the alterations that had been made over-night. They were many and varied, and some of them I must admit I did not quite understand.

Arenack, however, knew all there was to be known about them, and he would see that his helpers were well enough acquainted with the use of each piece of machinery to be able to give a good account of themselves.

That queer little man was by no means in the best of moods. Something had not been fixed according to his desires, or an after-thought had come to him that made some alterations desirable. He outlined in high technical terms what he wished. It was all very much over my head, but as he seemed to know what he wanted and how to get it done I gave him full permission to proceed.

"Only," I warned him, "don't go dismantling any of the apparatus, so that if we're caught unawares we'll be helpless."

He looked at me sourly. "I'm not so foolish as all that," he snapped. "Only one projector at a time will be out of action, and that not for long."

He showed me an intricate piece of mechanism that he told me was the disintegrating ray. It consisted of a long tube with a smaller tube on top of it. The small tube was made of some iridescent substance that I understood was a purely Martian invention, though Arenack corrected me later on this point, and told me the secret of its construction had been known to the Council for many years. This small tube led down to some generating apparatus underneath the gun, for such the whole thing actually was.

The larger tube ran back to a huge box-shaped arrangement that was connected up to pipes leading from the water tanks. As I understood his explanation of the process it ran something like this. A fine stream of water was shot out from the larger tube, and at the same time—for the action of both had to be synchronized perfectly—the ray was projected from the smaller tube.

The angles had been so calculated that ray and water jet gradually converged, meeting at a spot twenty-five yards ahead of the point of issue. The ray, acting on the stream of water, broke up its atomic structure, and formed another ray of incalculable power that hurled itself with irresistible force against anything in its path.

The radius beyond which the ray ceased to be effective had never actually been defined, but Arenack estimated it at something like a thousand miles in free space.

Of course we had actually no idea what weapons our prospective opponents possessed. We knew a little more about that paralyzing ray of theirs, but it was not very helpful. I had talked loosely about the production of a temperature of absolute zero until Arenack pulled me up and corrected me. He told me that what we had experienced was no such thing. As near as we could get it the lowest temperature recorded by any of the ships that had been waylaid had been something in the neighborhood of 44 degrees below, Fahrenheit scale, whereas absolute zero was supposed to be 273 degrees below Centigrade.

The production of absolute zero, he informed me gravely, would have resulted in some sort of transmutation of metals. In other words every scrap of iron and steel that encountered the source of this temperature—or lack of it—would be turned into neutronium, an element with the astounding weight of sixty million tons to the cubic inch.

The probable result would be to send the ship that generated this temperature and the one to which it was applied hurtling through space at a velocity far exceeding that of light, that is, of course, after first reducing them to the condition where the swirl of electrons round their nucleus definitely ceased, when a single proton would unite with a single electron to form the new substance.

The explanation set my head reeling. Used as we are to wonders in this age I could not think of it as anything else but the mad dream of a scientist. I put this as tactfully as I could.

"But after all," I said, "that's only a theoretical condition. There's no such element known in the whole of the Universe."

"Isn't there?" said Arenack sharply. "That's all you know. As a matter of fact if you get in the neighborhood of Sirius, you'll probably learn far more about neutronium than you care to know."

I left it at that. After all I was not likely ever to voyage beyond the bounds of our present planetary system, and if I did I would take care to avoid the vicinity of the star Sirius. At the same time I warned the little man not to be carried away by his passion for science and start experiments with a view of producing absolute zero. I had no wish to be reduced to a primal electron and proton and drop through the Universe in such a catastrophic fashion. We were on the kind of expedition where we could not afford to take foolish risks, even by way of experiment.

None the less we left Arenack with the feeling that the scientific side of the expedition was in good hands, providing we could curb the man's natural inclination to adopt new and untried methods. As we went out Jansca dropped a swift remark to the man that I did not catch. His face lit up, he nodded and smiled.

"What was it you said to Arenack?" I said, as we went along, "that made him of a sudden so human?"

Jansca glanced at me roguishly. "Merely making a suggestion that was after his own heart," she said. And not all the coaxing in the worlds could induce her to say more. I sighed and let the matter be.

Everything on board was functioning beautifully. I could have wished for a crew of my own Earth-men naturally, for one's heart always turns in the end to one's own planet, but these

*Arenack spoke the exact truth in this. Such a material exists in a small satellite of Sirius. Probably about the size of our Earth, it weighs almost as much as our Sun.

Martians were all picked men, magnificent specimens, mentally and physically. None of them seemed to resent my presence as an Earth-man or the position I occupied over them. Contact with them would have assured me of their loyalty, even had not Tambard done so already.

Messages kept coming and going all the time, but there was nothing in them of any importance. No further development seemingly had taken place. Venus was still isolated from its companion-worlds as far as communication was concerned, and the missing Guard-fleet had been given up as a total loss. Even the solitary survivor that had been silenced in the middle of transmitting a message must have been destroyed. It did not look as though it were merely a case of being unable to get a word past an insulating barrage.

Jansca made two curious requests of me during the course of the next few hours. There had come a lull in the messages that up till then had been streaming ceaselessly through the void.

"My dear," she said, "do you mind if I send a private code message to Tambard?"

I hesitated. By rights I should censor, or at least pass, every message that was sent out from the *Cosmos*.

"You should have no secrets from your husband," I said reprovingly.

"It is no secret," she smiled. "At least it will not be when I have got my reply, and done what I wish. But I would rather you did not know as yet. I have an idea that may or may not work. Until I am sure it functions I would rather say nothing about it, since I do not want to raise hopes too high, lest they drop too far the other way."

"Ah, well," I said, "I suppose I'll have to let you have your own way. Only can you assure me that your message will contain nothing that I would censor if I saw it?"

"Of course," she answered. "You can rest assured of that."

She sent the message herself. Within ten minutes an answer came back. She took that herself, too, and judging from her smiling face it was evidently the answer for which she wished.

"Can you tell me yet?" I asked, when she turned away from making the flash-back acknowledgement of "message received".

She handed me the reply form on which she had scribbled the answer. It ran, "You have my permission to proceed. Tambard."

"That," I said with chagrin, "tells me precisely nothing."

"Have patience a little longer, dear one," she said coaxingly. Then with a quick change of subject, "Jack," she remarked, "you have never yet had occasion to use that instrument I gave you, which you call 'The Crystal Eye', have you?"

"No," I said. I had practically forgotten about it, truth to tell.

"Then let me have it, please. I want it merely temporarily. You shall have it back safe and sound when I've finished with it. I would not ask, but I need two."

"Why, Jansca?"

"It is all part of this little plan—call it plot, if you like—of mine," she said softly, looking at me with eyes aglow.

"And that?"

"You shall know by the time we reach Gaudien."

"Remember I am commander here," I said with mock sternness. "I can make you talk if I wish."

"But you would not wish when it might hurt me," she said demurely, and drawing me towards her, kissed me swiftly on the lips. Then, just as swiftly she turned and fled from the room.

For one frantic moment I doubted the wisdom that had prompted me to bring her on the trip.

CHAPTER XX

Between Worlds

BUT I did not learn the details of Jansca's plan before we reached the Gaudien base. Something, I imagine, must have gone wrong with it, for whenever I twitted her about the matter she became very glum, and avoided giving me a direct answer.

We were slow in making the base. In such a short distance, regarding it in terms of space, we could not make great speed. Gaudien, comparatively speaking, was so close to its parent planet that we were not able to reach the limits of our acceleration with any hope of slowing down in time.

Had we attempted to keep at velocity—that is, our highest point of acceleration—we would almost certainly have overshot our mark, and wasted even more valuable time in bringing round in a circle a few thousand miles in diameter. No, all things considered, our slow progress to Gaudien was in the end the quickest course we could have taken.

To the uninitiated this is one of the mysteries of space-travelling, and it is surprising how few civilians can be made to realize that the greater the distance in free space between any two given points the greater the speed one can attain in passing from one to the other. It is merely a case of reaching velocity early and maintaining it over an appreciable period. Theoretically in free space there is no limit to the pace at which we can travel. Actually we find it wiser to keep our acceleration down much below its apparent maximum.

The glare of the artificial suns from the base picked us up a few thousand miles out; we clicked onto the directional beam, and headed for the Earthward side. This, as we learned on contact, was where the Guard-ship fleet was being gathered. Work there, too, had been speeded up and I was agreeably surprised to find that half a dozen ships were ready to proceed with us. Others would follow on later.

Harran had not been idle either. London and New York were mustering a fleet, which it was planned should junction with us somewhere in mid-space. Practically all the fleet was being drawn from the Pan-American Union and the British Commonwealth. The other two confederations of Earth, the United States of Europe

and the Asiatic Alliance, were too busy squabbling among themselves about foolish and idle racial prejudices to give a thought to a matter of such minor importance as the possible invasion of the planet.

The Gaudien people had done one thing that met with my hearty approval from a strategic point of view, though not from a human. They had fixed up a fast flyer with the latest thing in locators, put in special power communicator apparatus, and sent it off into the void in the direction from which our last warning had come. Her commander had orders not to attempt to engage in combat, even though it were being forced on him; but to turn tail and run away. It was his job to make contact of some sort with the invading vessels, and as soon as he managed to locate one to give the position on a general call.

In space where one has no fixed objects to work by, it is a difficult matter to plot an exact position; but the Martian officials at Gaudien had seen this and provided for it. The flyer was to accelerate to peak at progressive rates of speed, and her course would be plotted hourly as her reports came in. The moment she made contact and transmitted the news the Gaudien officials would be able from their knowledge of her speed to plot as reliably as possible the exact spot in the void where she encountered the invaders. The calculations necessary for the remainder of the fleet to come into line could then be worked out with comparative ease from such data.

To give the scout, for such she was, a greater margin of safety her locators had been arranged in a new fashion. Usually they are concentrated in the nose of the space craft and are operative over an angle ranging from forty five to ninety degrees according to the size of the vessel. But the scout—*M.* 2 was her designation—had had them fitted at intervals all round her shell, so that she was able to sweep the full circumference of a circle. Thus no other craft could approach her from any direction without her people being warned. Their extreme range, too, had, by a diversion of power from other uses on board, been increased considerably.

Had I known before that such a ship was being hurled into space as a bait and possibly as a sacrifice I do not think I would have countenanced the proceeding. However, when I heard of it, it was too late to do anything but hope that her people would at least have a fighting chance.

I got her angle of flight, however, took a copy of the chart that showed her calculated position, and seeing half a dozen supporting ships were already awaiting my orders, I decided to take off after her. The base officials took an affecting farewell of us, too affecting, I thought, for there was that in their manner that suggested they did not expect to see us again. One could not blame them very much, for if we failed to stem the tide, their turn would indubitably come next.

AT first I thought we would have to sheer close into Earth on our way to Venus, but a close study of the orbits showed me that the three planets formed in effect a triangle of which Earth was the apex, while Mars and Venus formed the extreme points of the base. Earth then was ahead of us in the yearly race round the Sun, and perhaps that explained why no concerted attack seemed yet to have been made on her. In one way, too, she was the least pregnable of the three planets, and it might be that she was to be tackled last. With Mars and Venus powerless to come to her assistance and an alien base on each planet she could slowly be encircled and subdued more or less at leisure. A pleasant prospect surely.

The third day out a faint message trickled through to us. The *M.* 2 had run into a nest of the invaders. So terrific was her speed that she had shot past them before they could recover from the surprise of her advent. She had picked them up first with her locators, and almost immediately had sighted them, tremendous cigar-shaped ships of a type hitherto unknown. Apparently they had been lounging along with their invisibility apparatus at rest, but the moment they mutually located each other the enemy ships disappeared as completely as one wipes chalk marks from the wall.

Whether they turned in pursuit of *M.* 2 may never be known, but it is certain that they immediately put up a power barrage that gradually overcame the strength of our craft's signals. The last transmission we caught was that the power behind the signals was being weakened, and the chances were that no further messages could get through. We tried to call up *M.* 2 and waited the ten minutes necessary for a reply to come but none reached us.

I was stretching out my hand with the idea of operating the call once more when Jansca caught me by the wrist.

"You mustn't," she said fiercely. "Do you want them to get our position? They may have locators of a kind we've never heard of."

"They'll locate us quickly enough," I said wearily. "Why, we'll be plain enough for them to see the moment they're near enough."

She smiled mischievously at me. "I think not," she said steadily.

Something in her eyes made me look at her a second time. "Is this the secret then?" I asked.

She nodded. "Part of it, lover-mate, part of it. What think you Arenack and I have been working on these last days if not some sort of a surprise such as this?"

"Tell me," I said quickly. "I think it is time now that I should know."

"I think that, too," she said. "This, in the main, is what we have done. Instead of utilizing the projectors for neutralizing rays, we have turned their strength on to making the *Cosmos* invisible."

"Very nice," I commented, "but if they are invisible, too, how much better off are we?"

"None," she said, "if they should be invisible. But they won't be. We have provided for that, but that I think I should prefer to keep a secret a little longer. Dear one, don't ask me to show you all my surprises at once. Arenack's surprises, rather, for though the idea was mine, it was his brains that translated them into fact. But believe me, the invaders won't know we are

coming until we're in their midst and begin to deal out destruction."

"They'll surely have locators," I objected.

"Most certainly. But you are forgetting our repeller rays. We are strengthening them up so that they will make the locator vibrations ineffective."

"Can it be done?" I said dubiously.

"It can be done. Arenack says so. Even a better answer is that he has done it."

"A rather marvellous man, this Arenack," I said with a touch of bitterness in my tone, "so wonderful indeed, that he is admitted to secrets I am not allowed to share."

"No, no!" she cried. "Not that, dear one! We have worked together, he and I; we have met with failures, and in some instances we have had to begin all over again. At times we knew the sickening fear that our efforts might be wasted and that we could not succeed, however hard we tried. We—I—have spared you all that. You have been free from the worry and suspense, free to attend to your work without distraction."

"I see that," I said. "Yes, I see that, Jansca, and I thank you for it. And I will not press you now to tell me this last surprise of all. I'll try to—be content to wait till the moment comes to reveal it."

She laughed happily. "I knew you would see it in that light once we talked it over," she said.

Like a child with a new toy—as the old Earth phrase goes—was she; eager to tell me all she had done, yet even more eager that the knowledge of it should come crashingly, with a sense of dramatic surprise. Well, it would not harm her to let her have her way, and reap her little harvest of joy. God knows, it might be the last we'd ever have to give each other.

The Call For Action

A GONG clanged in the control-room, an urgent signal from Arenack that something was afoot.

"Hume," I said, "you'll have to take charge here. We're wanted in the projection room. I don't know what it is, but you'd better be prepared to take orders from there."

"Is there any possibility of an engagement?" he queried anxiously.

Jansca came running forward as I hurried to the projection room right in the nose of the craft. She said no word, but caught me by the arm, and smiled at me. Perhaps after all this was the chance for which she and Arenack had been waiting.

The scientist looked up alertly as we entered the room. He and his assistants were surrounded by all sorts of spinning and humming apparatus, machines whose very purpose was beyond me.

"We've sighted something," he snapped. "I don't know what it is, but I'd suggest space suits be kept in readiness to don at a moment's notice."

"They're kept in readiness night and day," I told him. "Then is it so bad as that? I mean, what is it you've sighted?"

He pointed to an ordinary view tube connected with the ship's eye. I may mention in this regard that part of the alterations that had been made in the *Cosmos* consisted in running duplicate connections to the projecting room. In other words apparatus ordinarily operated from the control-room could, if the need arose, be cut out from that control, and worked from the projection room. The ship's eye, however, being merely a recording apparatus, when all was said and done could be used in both places simultaneously.

I bent down and looked at the vision plate on which the picture was reflected. At first I thought I could see nothing, only the blackness of space with the constellations gleaming brightly against it. Then abruptly one constellation was momentarily obscured as though something opaque had passed between it and me. Had I not been on the alert for some such thing I would most certainly have missed it.

Jansca was staring over my shoulder, and she gave an exclamation as the opacity moved across the stars, blotted out their light, passed and merged into the obscurity of space.

"You saw it?" said Arenack. "Or rather you saw its effect. An artificial eclipse, so to speak."

"But how could that happen?" I queried. "I thought the thing—space-ship, I suppose it is—was invisible. The light should have been bent round it and the stars should not have been obscured."

"Theoretically, yes," he answer. "But that space ship is invisible, not transparent. Also you're looking at what the ship's eye picks up and reflects on the screen of the vision plate; you're not seeing the actual thing itself with your own two eyes. In other words you lose the stereoscopic effect. Your eyes focussing on a point somewhere beyond your nose actually see to an extent round a body; fill in the background as it were, and bring it into the three-dimensional space.

"Close one eye, you lose that effect of a background, and transpose the object to a two-dimensional space, in other words a flat surface. If you care to put it another way, make it a little clearer perhaps, the vibrations that bend the light rays and induce invisibility can apparently make no allowance for what we might call the shifting of the focal point due to looking at the object with one eye open instead of two. You follow that?"

I nodded. I quite understood. It was merely a simple problem in optics, whose exact application I realized as soon as it was pointed out to me. There was one big objection, however, and I voiced it.

"It's rather risky relying on anything like that," I said. "Only sheer luck enabled us to pick up that object the way we did. Double luck, yours and mine."

"I haven't seen it yet in that fashion," Arenack answered. "As you say, this vision plate attached to the ship's eye leaves too much to chance. No, I picked it up in a more reliable apparatus. Come here."

He moved from his seat, motioning me to take his place. In front of where he had been sitting, at the level of his eyes, was something like a pair

of elongated binoculars, except that it had a hood arrangement that fitted like a mask to one's face.

ARENACK leaned over me and adjusted it. Some automatic mechanism, I learned later, on the lines of the clockwork that moves telescopes in the observatories, kept it constantly on the object to be viewed. In the case of a travelling body, however, alterations had to be made when necessary to allow for varying rates of speed.

I stared ahead, blinked, and then I saw. What I saw was a space ship modelled on the lines of that craft Jansca and I had been instrumental in destroying not so long before. Only, somehow, it did not seem so large.

"You saw it then?" said Arenack at my gasp of surprise. "One moment, please."

He made some minor adjustments. The space ship seemed to leap towards me; its walls shimmered and vanished, and it was as thought I were looking through glass into its interior. Everything, however, was on a reduced scale, and I could see nothing with any clearness of detail. Machinery, men—pigmy figures—dressed oddly. That was about all I could make out.

I slipped the hood from my face. "That's it then, is it?" I said, with a touch of amazement in my voice at the miracle I had witnessed.

"It's too far away yet for us to see details, of course," Arenack said, "but you see we've a means to overcome their invisibility."

"But how?" I queried.

"The—" He said something that sounded like 'dalifon', but before I could ask him what that meant Jansca interposed.

"What you call 'The Crystal Eye'," she explained. "That's why I borrowed yours, to make this. We needed two, to get the stereoscopic effect. To be successful it had to be made in pairs like the human eye. At least we thought so in the beginning, but now we've learned that the ship's eye can pick up such an object, we may be able to make further alterations."

"If we have the time and opportunity," Arenack said softly. "That little fellow is cutting across our line now, but at any moment he may change direction and veer round towards us. Perhaps they have some mechanism for detecting our presence, even though we happen to be invisible. We must not under-rate them, their intelligence, or their ability."

I realized that. I had no intention of doing any such thing. But I fancied I saw one defect in the apparatus of detection.

"This is good," I said, "excellent in fact, but does it not mean that you must keep someone with eyes constantly glued to the peep-holes here?"

Smilingly Arenack shook his head. "That is not necessary," he told me. "Of course, now and again one likes to make solo observations, but it is not wise, owing to the strain on one's eyes to sit there for long. Instead. . . ."

He gestured towards a white plaque on the wall in a direct line with 'the crystal eye', as I must call the apparatus for want of a better name. He touched a button on the desk beside him, and as I watched the milky surface of the plaque changed. It went black; the stars came out on it, and the tiny silver ship showed up quite clearly.

Relative to the immensity of space that formed its background it was moving so slowly that it seemed to be standing still, though actually it must have been cutting along at a tremendous rate. Its motion was like that of the hands of a clock, only perceptible after an interval.

As we stared its appearance changed. It became smaller, from a cigar shape it altered to a disk, then abruptly with a great leap the disk increased in size.

Arenack exclaimed. Jansca caught at my arm.

"It's changed direction," she cried. "It's coming towards us now, and it's moving at a terrific rate."

"Do you think they've managed to locate us somehow?" I asked Arenack quickly.

"Impossible to say," he answered. "Try alterating our course."

I got Hume on the open communicator. "Three points west of our present direction," I told him. "Hold her there for fifteen minutes."

Again we turned our eyes towards the plaque. The angle of the space ship seemed to have altered slightly. It was no longer a disk, rather an ellipse than anything. But even as we watched with bated breath, it slowly swung back again into its former position.

There was no doubt of it now. She was aware of our presence in space. By some mechanical device, protected by invisibility vibrations though we were, she had learned of our alteration of course and had adjusted her direction accordingly. Whether she intended to attack or not remained to be seen.

"Action stations," I ordered. "Space suit rig, and Oxcta solution for every man."

My voice was taken up by relays that trembled and reverberated through every fiber of the *Cosmos*.

CHAPTER XXI

At Grips

OUR own space suits were kept in readiness in the projection room, and beside them a ready solution of Oxcta put up in tiny phials. We broke ours, drank the highly concentrated contents, and proceeded to don the suits.

They were strongly constructed of a light yet durable alloy, and were heavily insulated against the cold of outer space. On the belt of each suit hung a reaction pistol, a thing with a vast mouth like an old-fashioned blunderbuss. Should the worst occur, the ship be destroyed and ourselves projected into the void, one possessed at least a fighting chance of life, such as one tossing in a tiny canoe on a wide ocean might hope for.

The reaction pistols furnished a means of propulsion through space. A man might live in such a suit, moving about in free space, for a matter of two or three days. After that he would almost certainly begin to starve to death, for there was no way, once one was buttoned in, of partaking of food or drink.

The suits had originally been designed to preserve the lives of passengers wrecked in space; the supposition was that any such wreck would almost certainly occur either in or near one of the traffic lanes, and rescue would be at most a matter of hours. No one had ever thought of the possibility of their being used to save survivors from a ship stricken in war far off the beaten track, for war we fancied had long been banished from the planets. It seemed now, though, that we were to learn differently, and the suits might well yet be our coffins. One could only hope for the best.

I had no time to think of the remaining ships of the fleet. Probably they were a couple of thousand miles away to the rear, and so safe for the time being. Their locators would no doubt have warned them of our altered course, and in due time the same means would give them notice of the presence of a stranger ship.

But since we had been discovered I did not think it wise to communicate with them. That would merely be making their position plain to every one who wished to know, for I did not lose sight of the fact that the invaders were almost certain to have some means of listening in on our signals.

Not unlikely their rate of progress would soon bring them close enough to distinguish the stranger, as she would become visible as soon as our neutralizing rays played on her. Not all the projectors had been turned from their original purpose to that of weaving an invisible web around us. Wisely enough I had suggested we leave one to be used as we had intended from the first.

Now—the moment we were screwed in our space-suits and the signal came through from the other departments that all was clear—I had the projector I have just mentioned aligned on the stranger. I wasn't quite sure that she was near enough yet for the vibrations to be effective, but it could do no harm to try.

I swung over the little lever that set the power going. For a space nothing happened. Then suddenly against the background of the void there leaped to life a lovely golden shape, the space ship sheering round to veer in at an angle to us.

It looked as though her intentions were purely exploratory, and that she meant to get close enough to us to treat us to a dose of that paralyzing cold. My own instinct, coupled with what I had already seen of its effects, however, convinced me that it was not a weapon that could be used at any great range. One must sheer in dangerously close to an opponent to bring it into play.

It was hardly likely that her people could have known that we had a means of countering its effects, though they must have guessed that something was wrong from the fact that we were invisible ourselves. I doubted very much whether they would have any apparatus on board—unless they were years ahead of us in scientific progress—that would warn them their own cloak had been ripped aside and the ship revealed to any eyes that cared to see.

An idea struck me. Granted that they knew no more than that an invisible space ship was somewhere in the same arc as they, it was not altogether impossible that they might have mistaken us for one of their own craft.

I was just about to put the idea to test when a call came through from the transmitting room. I answered it. It was the duty operator speaking.

"A series of strange signals have been coming through for some minutes," he informed me. "I can't make head or tail of them. They're in no code I know anything about."

"How's the recorder transcribing them?" I asked. If the automatic recorder was registering them there must be some arbitrary arrangement about them that might yet yield a clue to their nature.

"As a series of impulses," the operator told me. "They're coming over with irregular frequency, and the recorder is putting them down as lines and dots. If it wasn't that it's never used nowadays I'd think it was someone trying to transmit in archaic Morse code."

"Morse?" I ejaculated. "Do you happen to know anything about *that?*"

The operator chuckled. "Not much. Nobody does nowadays. But I know enough to be able to say that this isn't Morse. Here, sir, something's coming through again. I've got a group combination that came several times before. It looks a 'message begins' sign. It's clattering."

"Throw your communicator open so I can hear what's going on?" I commanded.

THE screen immediately lit up, showing me the interior of the transmitting room, and the sounds of the instruments working came plainly to my ears. The automatic recorder was throwing out sheet after sheet of the prepared paper each sheet covered with irregularly spaced dots and dashes, the latter the 'lines' the operator had mentioned.

I listened to the clack of the machine as it worked. It was going at a fearful rate, a sort of urgent 'click-click-click', then a long 'click', and so on. Something in the pace at which the signals came over made me think that the operator at the other end was fast losing patience. Even these automatic recorders can respond to and register the emotions of the distant operators whose signals wake them to life.

"Losing patience," I commented to myself. "Now, he's getting angry."

The clicks came with a sharp rattle, a perfect hail storm of them. There was a pause, possibly while the operator waited for a reply. Then when none came our machine began to chatter again over an octave, and ended on a final note that expanded into one sharp explosion. Anger, irritation, and finally utter disgust. I read as plainly as day that those were the emotions behind those sounds.

Though I waited a full minute nothing more came through.

"Good," I said to the operator, "you can cut out the general circuit now. But keep those records. We may like to try our hands at deciphering them yet."

I cut out and spoke to Jansca.

"How's that stranger ship been behaving while I've been at the communicator?" I asked her.

"Maintaining distance," she said. "It's made no attempt to get closer. It looks as though it doesn't want to—yet."

"Wants to make sure who we are first," I commented, and I told her something of what I had seen and heard.

"Ah," she said, "doubtful of us then. Perhaps that's a good sign. I wonder what Arenack thinks of it."

"Thinks of what?" he said, looking up from his work on the projector.

I told him.

"That's it then," he said. "They're trying to chat us. Think we must be a sister craft, and have lost patience because we haven't answered. But you see that means they don't know our ships have discovered an invisibility process. When they find out. . . ." He finished the sentence with a soft whistle.

I looked towards the plaque where he had pointed. The golden shape was moving again; the distance between us was lessening rapidly.

"It's coming," said Arenack. "The planets know what surprises they have in store for us."

"Surprises be eclipsed!" I said irritably. "Don't let us talk of what they can do. Do something ourselves instead."

"The atomic discharge?" he suggested, stretching his hands towards the nearest tube.

"No not that . . . . not yet!" I cried. God knows I did not want to hurl anyone into utter dissolution if it could be avoided.

"Then what?" he queried.

"The ray projector," I said. "You've taken the kick out of it, and are merely using its vibratory scale."

"I'm not," he said calmly. "What I'm doing is using a wave with a lesser number of vibrations. If I quicken up the vibrations I can send the ray over again."

"That's quite certain?" I said. "Because if it is you should be able to vary the intensity."

"I can," he chuckled. "Is there anything you'd like me to do in that line?"

I nodded. "I don't want to destroy that craft utterly. It's rather like shooting him sitting. You see, he hasn't opened hostilities. But something has to be done. Heat him up a bit, will you?"

"I'll try. Stand aside, all of you. There may be a flash-back when I change over from one scale to the other."

We stood to one side, watching him curiously. In his space suit though, he had the visor down as we all had so we could see and hear, he looked an odd machine-like being, someone not quite human.

Over the flexible metal fingers that covered his own flesh and blood ones, he drew thick yet pliable rubber gloves, flung a glance at the plaque before him, adjusted a vernier scale screw on the edge of the tube, and pulled over a lever. We watched the growing bulk of the space ship as it showed in the plaque. For a minute or so nothing happened. Then the golden shape seemed to dull a little, just for an instant. It shone out again, gleaming rather bright than before, I thought.

I was sure of that a little later. It was beginning to glow; from gold it passed to a deeper orange, and gradually a faint tinge of red crept over it.

"Better hold it at that, Arenack," I said warningly. "You've got the outer shell red hot. I don't want to roast them. I'd rather get them to surrender if I can. We'd like to know something more about their tribe, you know."

"I'll notch it a shade higher," he said. "That heat will radiate off quickly into space. Unless, of course," he added, "they've got something to counteract."

I DIDN'T think they had. I could have sworn we had them helpless, we held them so long. I was even beginning to think there was a chance of capturing the ship, and perhaps the crew, intact when the thing itself happened.

The red-hot shell of a sudden began to lose its color. It wavered fitfully down to orange, but somehow Arenack managed to hold it at that, though I saw out of the corner of my eye that he had to apply an extra notch or so to do it. One force, it seemed, was struggling against the other, neither strong enough to win. They were locking in neutral.

I have never made a bigger mistake.

Of a sudden the orange dimmed down. I don't quite know what happened next. To this day I am not quite sure. Jansca, however—perhaps fancifully—says it looked as though someone had rolled up the edges of space and hurled it like a ball into nothingness between us.

But what I do know was what happened in the projection room. There came a vivid sheet of blue light; the room seemed to grow chokingly cold as though one were breathing—or trying to breathe—liquid air. I can give no better description of it than that. Arenack made an abrupt movement and a startled oath fell from his lips—all this you must understand happened simultaneously—and with his gloved hand he dragged over the lever that cut off the power.

The air of the room cleared on the instant; the blue light vanished and I became aware of Arenack crouching over his machine as though he had been struck and thrown there.

I made a swift movement and caught him by the shoulder, and at my touch he slipped to his knees.

"Jansca," I called, and between the two of us we raised him to his feet. His assistants came to our aid.

He opened his eyes, blinked, and pushed the visor of his space suit helmet further back from his face.

"I'm all right now," he said. "That was a near thing, though. Give me a bit of a shaking. If I hadn't cut off power when I did. . . ."

"Are you sure you feel better?" I said insistently.

"Yes, I'll be over it in a minute or so at the worst. It's just the shock of it. I thought for the moment we were gone."

"So did I," I said grimly. "Have you any idea what happened?"

"A glimmer," he said. "They've got some-

thing to beat our heat ray. Some sort of repelling force. But the nerve of it! They used our ray as a path for it, hurled it back on it and into the machine. If I hadn't been wearing insulated gloves, I wouldn't have been able to pull the lever over, and if I hadn't pulled the lever over—the stars confound them!—we'd have gone out in a blue flare."

I think we were all a little shaken. It is not nice to escape by the veriest margin such a death as this. We had no illusions at all about the narrowness of our avoidance of it.

Arenack jerked himself to his feet. "Can't afford to take our senses off the job for a moment," he said warningly. "That craft's notched the first score. Thinking he's taught us a lesson he may try to push it home. Jupiter, but if he has any more samples of that sort we'll be lucky to get out of it with our lives."

"If it's a case of lives, ours mustn't be lost," Jansca declared. "If we go the barriers are down and there'll be none to hold them. At any cost we have to keep alive long enough to learn who these people are and where they come from and give our knowledge to the worlds."

She turned to Arenack. "That's your work, my friend," she said steadily. "Keep us alive, no matter who is destroyed. The *Cosmos* must come through."

Arenack smiled cheerfully. "I'll do my best, Jansca," he said. "If the chief gives me a free hand I'll clean up the void."

"You can have that free hand," I said. "Ah, he's swinging again."

The gleaming space ship had indeed swung around. He was rising at an angle too. I caught a glimpse of the underside of the ship, saw it on a slant as it were, and at once the meaning of the maneuver came to me.

"He's climbing, trying to get above us," I cried. "We mustn't let that happen. We can't defend ourselves if he starts hovering over us."

I sprang to the control communicator, and snapped a quick order or so. We could hardly rise on the course we were taking. Before we got high enough the other would be well over us. The only thing left to do with any hope of success was to make the nearest thing possible to a right-angle turn, and rise from that. It was not the sort of maneuver I would have countenanced ordinarily for the great strain imposed on the engines might easily tear them from their beds. But it was the one desperate chance left us to try.

The abrupt veering of the ship threw us off our balance and flung us against each other, the contact of our space suits filling the room with clatter. Some glass thing, a retort or test tube or something of that nature, fell to the floor, and crashed into fragments.*

The instant we recovered ourselves I swung my eyes round to the plaque on the wall. The space ship had wavered out of our line of vision, but Arenack bent over "the crystal eye," made several adjustments, and presently it swam back, a little distorted and out of focus. Another adjustment or so, and the sights were trained on it, bringing it back into the dead center of the plaque.

We seemed to be now at much the same altitude, hovering, circling like two hawks, each watching the chance to strike. How long this fighting for place lasted I can't say. To us waiting there it seemed hours, but it could not have been more than minutes.

Then abruptly the stranger veered; a dazzling white glow flickered about her nose, and I waited for what terrible thing I knew not. But nothing happened to us. Why, I saw in the very next instant.

One of our half dozen supporting ships must have blundered somehow into our orbit, and been located by the stranger. The white glow flickered about her nose seemed to roll up into a ball and bounce across the void. It spread, taking on the outlines of one of our ships. For the space between breaths it remained thus. Then the ship broke, smashed up, dissolved into a myriad fragments that went floating and drifting away. . . .

"The atomic gun, Arenack," I said grimly between my teeth. Hostilities had begun!

I do not think the stranger ship's people could have known what struck them. One instant they were there, the next they had been exploded into ultimate nothingness.

CHAPTER XXII

The Vandals of the Void

THE explosion such as this set up in terrestrial air would have blown us out of existence. But as it was nothing happened.

We could now sit back and count our gains and losses. We ourselves had suffered no damage, but I had no idea how the five remaining ships had fared.

My first act was to call the transmission room to get in touch with them, and presently the heartening news came back that they were all safe. Only the one we had seen destroyed before our eyes had met with disaster.

From now on, however, it behooved us to go warily. We had met one enemy craft and the chances were that she was probably only one of many scouting about. Whether she had had the opportunity—and taken it—of communicating with her friends we could not say. I considered it safer to proceed on the assumption that she had done so.

The most irritating feature of our two encounters was their utter conclusiveness. One side or the other was definitely wiped out of existence, and because of that we were no nearer to learning the things we wished to know. Had we been able to make some captives, or at the worst capture a ship we would almost certainly have discovered something to indicate who these vandals of the void were and from what planet they hailed.

It was a great relief to climb at last out of our heavy and, to an extent, cumbersome space suits, and feel that they could be temporarily discarded. Nevertheless I issued a general warning

*There would be no such thing as actual gravity in free space, but each space ship, for convenience sake, would create its own artificial gravity.

that they must be kept ready to don again at a moment's notice.

After the strenuous time of the last hour or so we were all more or less exhausted—I fancy there must be something in the play of these giant forces that saps the strength and spirits of a man if he keeps long in contact with them—so I sent Arenack off to rest and told Jansca I thought she had better turn in. She asked me what I intended doing, as if that mattered, and when she found I meant to relieve Hume at control:

"I think it's you who need a rest more than any of us," she said.

"Don't be foolish, Jansca," I said wearily, for I had no mind to argue. "Actually I've done no more than stand by and watch while you and Arenack and his assistants did the work."

"Yours was the harder part then," she said. "We had our work to keep us occupied. You, with your responsibilities, the knowledge that you were in command and that the lives and safety of all on board lay at your door had no such anodyne."

"Enough," I said sharply. "Jansca, you've just reminded me that I'm in command. Carry out my orders, please."

She made a wry face, but she went off.

I took over from Hume. Though he said nothing I thought from the look of him that he was glad to be relieved. He had got the *Cosmos* back on her original course, so that part of it need not trouble me for a while yet. I gave the control into the hands of the Martian second officer with orders to hold her, and turned to the work of plotting our further direction.

The chart on which our evolutions had been automatically recorded was a mass of amazingly intricate geometrical figures, the mere sight of which set my brain in a whirl, but the work had to be done, and I set to work to tackle it at once. All the same it was some time before I managed to orient myself. Then with the planet chart in front of me I ruled the course I wished to take, plotted the figures, and gave the altered direction to the Martian second.

He frowned over them for a moment, then flung a glance up at the moving chart that showed our progress from stage to stage.

"That will take us direct to Venus," he said. "You're heading for Shangun?"

"Yes," I said. Our eyes met. I read in his the feeling that I was running the ship headlong into danger.

"I'm asking the company to take no risks that I don't take myself," I said steadily, for I understood only too well what was passing through his mind. "If we have to make a sacrifice of ourselves, it can't be helped. But of one thing you can rest assured, and that is that I won't take risks if I can get what I want in other ways."

"I know that," he said in that throaty voice the Martian uses when he is holding his feelings in leash. "I do not question the wisdom of your orders, Mitaka, but I am human. Still the thing most feared least often happens."

He turned away to put my instructions into operation, but he left me thoughtful. He had voiced the idea in my own heart, the unspoken dread that the risks we were taking, the sacrifices we were making might at the last be all in vain. Yet we had already—if one cared to count our previous adventure—dealt with and beaten two of the enemy ships.

CLINIGO came in a moment later, an angry little man. He had been resting when the trouble began and had awakened to find himself virtually a prisoner in his own part of the ship, one where I believed he was least likely to come to harm.

He stood and eyed me for a moment, his whole body quivering.

"It was you," he said with an odd harsh note in his voice, "who ordered that I be kept to the rear of the ship?" And when I nodded, "Why was that?" he demanded.

"Because," I said steadily, "you were in what was the safest place. Even if we were blown up you would have had a fighting chance in your space suit. We others. . . ." I signified with a comprehensive gesture what would be our fate in such circumstances.

For the moment I thought he himself was going to explode, but he conquered his wrath by an effort.

"By what right did you give such an order?" he said bluntly.

"The right I acquired when you and Tambard sent me on this expedition. You may remember you came as a passenger, and the point was made that your power as a Councillor was not operative on board."

He smiled at that, the first faint flicker of a smile I had seen in his face that day.

"I'm not cavilling at being under your orders," he said in a softer voice. "Do you think that for one moment I question the authority delegated to you? No such thing. But I deprecate the policy that considers my life of such value that special precautions should be taken to preserve it. I am an old man, and of all on this ship I am probably the one who could best be spared."

"Sire," I said conventionally, "your knowledge and your wisdom cannot be duplicated."

"There is no member of the Council present, Sanders, only an extra passenger. So please don't talk rot. But as an extra passenger, and one who would share in any danger that arises, please don't treat me as a child in the future."

"Well, if you look at it that way. . . ." I mumbled.

"I do," he interrupted. "It is the only way in which a sensible man could possibly regard it." He slewed one eye round to the space chart with the red line of our intended course pointing like a lance at the heart of Venus. I saw him start, then his eyes came slowly to rest on me.

"Man," he said with a note of incredulity in his voice, "are you actually making for Venus?"

"Yes," I informed him. "Why not?"

"But it's cut off from the rest of the worlds. There's been no communication for days."

"The more reason for going there."

"We don't know what may have happened. The entire planet may be in the hands of these vandals of the void," he pointed out.

"Still more reason for going there," I assured him. "Until we know exactly what has hap-

(Illustration by Paul)

High above the golden fleet of the meadow-sail wheeled and dipped, and the city of wonder and beauty was dissolving like ice.

pened to Venus, we're in the dark. The sooner we tear the veil away the better."

He looked doubtful. Not that he did not wish to see his home planet again, but he had no desire that lives should be sacrificed idly, as he seemed to think I might do.

"Well, I suppose you know best," he said at length. "We're in your hands now. You've pulled us through one encounter successfully, so you may do so to the end."

"That's rather optimistic," I smiled. "You heard what happened? We had to wipe the stranger out—there was nothing else for it, particularly as she'd already got one of our consorts. And, by the way, the thanks are not due to me, but to Arenack and Jansca, and their assistants. It was science that won the victory, not generalship."

"So I believe. What's your acceleration?"

"I'm increasing velocity up to peak," I told him.

We were already far out in space, far beyond the furthest point our scouting ships had penetrated to when they were silenced, perhaps for ever, by the strange space craft. The tremendous pace at which we were travelling was indeed nearly our undoing on one occasion. Our locator alarms rang frantically, I remember, and I jumped to it, thinking we had made contact with the strange ships again. But our tests showed the neighborhood of a body of vast size, vast that is, compared with what we had expected.

Luckily we managed to swerve out the few thousand miles necessary to clear the body, but even then we felt an extraordinary gravity pull, and we began to drop.

"I'd say it was a minor planet," said Arenack, "only there's none charted here." He looked frankly puzzled. "I can't see anything either," he went on, "and none of our sight instruments record any pictures."

At the first pull downward we had got our gravity screens out, and they were now working sufficiently well to counteract the attraction. Actually the pulls were just about balancing each other.

"We'd better not pass until we've discovered what it is," I suggested. "Any unknown body demands investigation these days. For all we know it may have something to do with the enemy."

The M. 10 Appears

WE backed on our course, cautiously approaching nearer to the body. Presently a great section of the background of stars was blotted out, and we gasped. The thing with which we had so nearly collided was a dead world, a coal-black world of darkness and desolation, about, as we found from our tests, a quarter size that of Earth's moon. How it had died, what cosmic catastrophe had brought it to this state, a huge cinder whirling along on its orbit, we had no time to decide. Nevertheless I made up my mind that if the fates spared us, some day I could come back and investigate the past history of this other vandal of the void.

I could not see at first why it had not been discovered before, but Arenack gave me a reason that seemed sufficient. Because of its very blackness, he told me, it reflected very little light. It could have been noticed in the ordinary way only by its passing across and obscuring some other star that was being kept under observation. And the chances of this happening were about one in a million. But, as I was to learn later from many astronomers with whom I talked about it, this was by no means the only dull, lifeless world floating free in space. There were many others, gradually being charted. . . .

We passed it by. All our tests were purely negative. There was no life of any sort on it, not even an extremely low form, as far as we could gather. That, however, did not mean that its discovery might be without value. No heavenly body is altogether useless. Rolgar we first got from the dead world of our own moon, and there are others, minor planets, asteroids and so on which yield valuable ores, some of them unknown in the habitable three worlds.

We passed it by, this dead world, and again took up our running. Venus was a little bigger now, growing slowly, yet perceptibly. The days passed uneventfully, so much so that we began to wonder if the invaders had vanished as suddenly and as mysteriously as they had appeared. We were destined to be disillusioned in the simplest manner possible.

Once again our locators warned us of alien bodies, and warned by our previous encounter I ordered "action stations" at once. The stranger was coming right for us, whacking up a tremendous pace. Presently we managed to pick him up, both by the ship's eye and by the reflections from the crystals on the plaque. Then he was not travelling invisibly. He was still too far off for us to see him yet, save as a silver streak moving athwart the blackness of space, but even in that view I sensed a certain familiarity.

For a split second my mind wavered, then:

"Operator," I called through the transmission communicator, "stand by to transmit."

I heard his startled gasp, saw his face in the vision plate register surprise and curiosity. I gave him a plain call in the international code.

"Leave the general communicator open," I said when he took it. "I want to see and hear what transpires."

He did so. Back in a very few seconds came a startled, "Who the planets are you? Where are you anyway?"

"Give them our call sign," I told the operator. "Not our name. Get his name, however."

It was slow work, this questioning and answering in the code. It always is and I must say I prefer working in atmosphere where one can use the televox and save both time and trouble. Still I should not growl, for as the messages came off from the recorder they were thrown on my screen, and I could read them with ease.

"Got yours," came the answer. "*M. 10* here. But where are you? Our locators register your presence, but we can't see you."

"Throw off the vibrations," I said over my shoulder to Jansca. "We won't hurt to be visible for a while now."

I could imagine their vision man on the *M. 10* blinking as we suddenly appeared out of nothingness, blinking, staggering, perhaps gasping with amazement at the apparent miracle of it. But they wasted no time once they were sure of us.

"We've escaped," ran their next message. Our operator had told them we thought they had been wiped out of existence. "It's a long story," went on the continuation. "Can't tell it all over the power. But we think we're being pursued."

"Tell them they'll have to sheer in, connect with our ports and send a man across," I said to the operator. "We want to know all they can tell us and more. Better send their best man, the commander if he can rely on anyone to carry on in his absence. He'll have to be prepared to remain on board with us. Get action. We haven't time to spare."

"Coming across at once," I read on the screen two seconds later. "Stand by to connect up."

It was ticklish work, making that connection, but I must say it was done in a masterly fashion and in record time. I went down to the port myself to meet the commander. One of his assistants came to the edge of the connecting tube with him, a piece of foresight that was very welcome. It gave me the chance of instructing the man verbally—much the quicker way—and of impressing on him the necessity of losing no time.

EVERYTHING went like clock-work. We closed our port, disconnected, and *M. 10* sped off, heading for the Gaudien base and Mars beyond. The moment she began to move our vibratory apparatus was got to work, and we vanished once more.

"Now," I said to the commander of *M. 10*, Balena his name was, "come to the projection room with me and you can tell your tale there while we watch. I have an idea that our time will be short."

"What are you doing?" he asked curiously. "I mean why are you making for Venus?"

"Because," I said, a trifle mischievously, "we want to go there."

He looked at me as though he was not quite sure that I was in my right senses. The Martians as a whole are almost lacking in humor, though now and again one strikes one who can appreciate a joke with the best of them. But it wasn't what I had said that made him stare, so much as what it implied.

"And to think," he murmured, "that that's just where I got away from. I never thought when I took my chance with the others that they'd get me back there, dead or alive. But I suppose I'd better start at the beginning and tell you all, or you won't know what I'm talking about."

"First," I said, though I was burning to hear his tale, "let us make the projection room. Here is the door. There are others who may wish to hear your story and to whom the knowledge of what you've discovered may be helpful."

I opened the door, ushered him to the room and made him known to Jansca, Clinigo and Arenack. He saluted them, then turned to me as his conductor.

"Now," I said, "what is it you have to tell us? What has happened to Venus? Why has the planet been cut out of communication?"

"Because they've got one, if not more bases there," he answered, "and it's only a matter of time—short at that—till they subjugate the whole planet. Then they'll turn their attention to our worlds."

"You think there is no hope?" said Clinigo brokenly.

The other hesitated. "For Venus?" he asked. Clinigo nodded.

"I'm sorry," said the other, "but I don't see how there can be."

Clinigo turned away. He seemed to me to be studying the growing image of Venus reflected on the plaque on the wall, but I think in reality he had turned to hide the tears in his eyes, and I could have sworn I caught the murmured words, "My poor planet."

He came round suddenly, another Clinigo than the one I had got to know.

"Will you please tell us," he said in a voice from which all emotion had been wrung as one wrings water from a wet cloth, "as completely as possible everything of importance that has occurred to you since we lost touch with you?"

Clinigo had forgotten he was a passenger and remembered only that he was one of The Three.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Evening Star

IN precise, dry, formal tones Balena told his story. I can only give the gist of it here. When the fleet sent out from Gaudien had been attacked by the invisible foe, the *M. 10* had been saved by the fact that due to the necessity of repairing a temporary defect in her propulsive machinery, she had lagged behind. Her observers had witnessed the disposal, practically *en masse*, of the whole of the Martian fleet, and realizing that there was nothing to be gained by lingering near the scene of the disaster, Balena turned tail, transmitting to Gaudien as he went.

Something had gone wrong with the locators and they had no means of knowing, even if they had been able to rig them to cover their rear, whether the foe was following or not. Some odd ray, too, must have sheered close to the *M. 10*, for in some way the receiver apparatus got damaged and failed to function. In the midst of transmitting, the whole of the ship's company began to feel a paralyzing cold creeping over them, and one by one they dropped at their posts.

"Why wasn't Oxcta served out to the men?" I broke in to ask. "That would have saved you all."

"Might have caused our deaths, you mean," Balena said, and I had to admit that possibly he was right. But it seemed that when the fleet was being fitted out at Gaudien, Oxcta supplies ran short; as time was pressing they would not wait for them to come from Mars, but decided to take the risk and send the fleet without them. The bulk of it was concentrated on the flag ship. But even then, Balena stated, that hadn't helped. Oxcta might neutralize the paralyzing cold, but

it had no effect where the other weapons of the strangers were concerned.

They came back to consciousness to find themselves prisoners, and their ship in charge of strange beings, taller even than the Martians, whose most distinctive features were their deep purple eyes and the ridge of horn on each man's head. They spoke a strange language but one marvellously simple in construction it seems, for Balena himself managed to pick it up under instruction in five days. That is, he learned it well enough to be able to talk it haltingly.

My original guess, or rather Parey's information, had been correct. The strangers came from the planet Mercury, and were part of an expedition, partly exploratory and partly predatory, sent out with the view of finding a more congenial home somewhere among the other habitable planets. They seemed of a rather high order of intelligence, ruthless in their ways, yet their civilization had moved along lines different from ours. Apparently they had made a number of discoveries we knew nothing about, while in many ways we had the advantage of them.

However . . . . they had established a base on Venus in one of the uninhabited districts, and there they had gradually accumulated a space navy. Venus, it seemed, suited them as a base, but they wanted a world with an atmosphere not so cloudy and heavy as a place of permanent settlement.

Apparently they would have been content to keep their presence on Venus a strict secret, secure in the knowledge that their comings and goings in their invisible fliers were unknown, had they not somehow discovered that Venus was one of the constituent bodies in the confederation of three worlds.

How they made this discovery is not quite clear, neither is it clear what they hoped to gain by holding up and examining the ships of the interstellar traffic. Possibly they went over the various vessels in a spirit of scientific curiosity as well as in an endeavor to learn what new and formidable weapons they might have to face when they at last launched the armada that was to bring the three planets into their net.

Luckily—unluckily for the Mercurians—in every instance they held up space liners, from whose apparatus of course they were able to learn but little of the planets' possibilities of defense. They might have added more to their quota of knowledge from their brief survey of the *Cosmos* had not Jansca and I, by the most miraculous piece of luck, been able to prevent them getting away with it.

Once, however, that they discovered the worlds were beginning to wake up to the menace they embodied, the Mercurians drew a communication barrage around Venus, and set to work to trawl space with the deliberate idea on the one hand of striking terror into the hearts of their opponents before they had time to concentrate their forces, and on the other of capturing intact a ship and its crew whom they could study, and from whom they could learn something of the conditions they would have to overcome. Perhaps they had a feeling that somewhere they might strike a traitor. How little they knew of the men of the Guard-ships, no matter from what planet the crews were drawn.

Balena and his men identified the place to which they were taken as being somewhere on the Southern edge of the Venusian tropics, one of the waste lands of that planet. The temperature was a bit on the high side—Venus has a greater humidity than Mars—and they suffered considerably. But the Mercurians appeared to relish it. But the fact that the heat, from the Martians' point of view, was very trying gave Balena an idea, and after thinking round it for a time he formed a plan, which, gradually he communicated to the crew.

They began by dropping one by one as though overcome by the excessive humidity. Probably it was not all acting either. At least one man died from the stresses of that period. The Mercurians became alarmed. They were not anxious to lose the Martians before they had had an opportunity of forcing from them all the information they could. They took Balena apart and their leader questioned him closely as to the cause of this condition, and any possible method of alleviating it. Balena after some hesitation admitted that they had a preparation on his own space ship that would help to counteract the trouble.

The Mercurians sent for it. It was a semi-liquid preparation, bromine, used extensively to form bromides and bromates, and as such the two cylinders containing it were labelled in Martian characters. Some of the Mercurians, who had made good progress in Tlananian from the various text books they had taken from space liners they had raided, were able to read the labels and satisfy themselves that the stuff was quite innocuous from their point of view.

Bromine, however, was an entirely new substance to them, and naturally they were unaware of certain of its peculiar properties. They did not know that it had to be used with great care, and before it could be used medicinally it had to go through a number of processes, all very simple but none the less necessary. As a matter of fact the Martians carried it in the crude form in cylinders simply because the base had run out of the manufactured article; the space-ship people could not wait for new supplies to be made up, but had taken the raw product with them to distil as the need arose. In graduated doses and mixed with certain other chemicals the Martians employed it extensively to relieve the reaction from the strain of intensive watching when on patrol duty. The Martian temperament was such that it demanded a bromide rather than a phosphorene tonic, a sedative rather than an energizer.

It is certain that the Mercurians would not have allowed their captives to handle the stuff had they realized that in its raw state, it was capable, if liberated in sufficient quantities, of causing considerable distress, most probably pneumonia, and not unlikely death to any who came in contact with it without taking reasonable precautions.*

*Because of the above dangers attending the handling of raw bromine many workmen employed in its transport in London in 1930 refused to cart it. Vide London Daily Press Oct. 3rd, 1930.

The Martians were fully aware of this and prepared to act on it the moment the time was ripe. Balena, it may be recorded, had selected for his coup a period when all the Mercurian space ships were away from the base, and only the leader of the party and a small but reliable guard had been left in charge.

To make a long story short, Balena, instead of releasing the bromine by means of the graduated scale on the tap of the cylinder, turned it suddenly full on with the nozzle pointed towards the Mercurian group, who were standing idly watching them. The liquid had been packed under Martian atmospheric pressure, and for use only in such atmospheric conditions. The denser atmosphere of Venus, with its heavier pressure, coming into contact with the bromine through the air-holes the moment they were opened, forced it out through the nozzle in a thin stream of amazing force.

The Mercurians staggered, coughed, gulped and were seized with paroxysms of coughing that rendered them absolutely helpless for the time being. At the first sign that the stuff was taking effect the Martians began to run back to their space-ship. Balena threw the hissing cylinder into the midst of the squirming Martians, released the pressure in the second cylinder and threw it after its mate. The cylinders themselves were very small things—a man could carry one quite comfortably—and it would not take long for the bromine to exhaust itself. Also some of the Mercurians might have escaped the full effects of the blast. In view of this Balena was sure that the sooner they made off the better.

They reached the space ship, wrenched open the door, piled inside, closed the door, and started to ascend just as the first of the Mercurians came running after them and began to shoot with their rays. It would have gone hard with the Martians, no doubt, had they had to contend with a guard on the ship. But although one was kept over it during the night, none was considered necessary in the day when the captives were kept in the camp and were in full sight of everyone.

Even as it was, however, the first flash of one of the ray tubes came dangerously close to *M. 10*. Also, for some unaccountable reason, the engines refused to function properly. Balena did the only thing left him to do, swung the gravity screens out at once. Of course he was taking a fearful risk, and for a moment it look as though the ship would ascend so quickly that the friction of the air would heat her up to the point of combustion.

But, somehow, by a frantic manipulation of the screens, Balena and his men prevented the worst from happening. The outer shell indeed was quite red-hot by the time they passed beyond the atmosphere, but in the cold of space it radiated away rapidly, and presently, as the engines began to respond to treatment, they were able to get the necessary kick-off from them.

"AND then, of course, your locators picked us up," I said as he ended. "Well done, Balena, I'll see you're recommended for this."

"If I might ask, sir," he said, "just what are you proposing to do?"

"We're running for Venus," I told him. "Rather hard lines on you since you've just managed to escape from there. But duty is duty."

"I wasn't thinking of that aspect of it altogether," he said with a wry face. "But they must have lifted the barrage, temporarily at any rate. Not so long after we got into free space we heard signals, not from any of our ships. I think they must have been recalling their fleet."

"Probably," I said grimly. "I believe that was the first of them we dealt with a while back. But it will take days before the last of them straggle back from the void."

There was one other possibility that struck me, though now was not the time to make it public. It was quite as likely that the Mercurians, besides signalling the ships back to the Venusian base, had also sent out a call for help to their own planet. We might not only have to face a few isolated fliers; we ran the risk of being overwhelmed by an armada dropping suddenly out of the void. Well, it was a risk we had to take, one we had been prepared to face when we signed on.

I got Balena to give us the location of the base, and altered our course so we would strike Venus in the tropics. I had in mind the desperate throw of striking at the heart of their power-plant in the hope of throwing it out of action before the sky ripped open, and a fleet that hopelessly outnumbered us swept down to wipe us out of existence.

At best we could only hope to delay and hamper them. The concentration of the fleets of Earth and Mars was no doubt taking place now; they had to guide them the knowledge we had acquired and had transmitted back, and that in the end might make them invincible. But in no circumstances that I could envisage were they likely to reach Venus in time to snatch us from the maws of destruction. We were the sacrifice that the three worlds must make if they were to secure their future safety.

All that day the ether was thick with strange signals passing in a code none of us knew. Even Balena with the knowledge he had acquired of the Mercurians' language was unable to decipher them for us. Suggestions, warnings, entreaties, appeals for aid—they might be any or all of these for aught we could say.

The one thing we could do with regard to them was to locate their point of origin, and on that I kept the assistant operators working overtime. Some of the signals were streaming out from Venus, and presently too we began to catch other signals in the interplanetary code. The Mercurians had had to lift the barrage to send their own messages through, and the Venusian authorities were trying frantically to get in touch with the rest of the Universe. They must have wondered why no answers came.

For my part I did not think it wise even to warn them that the folk responsible for their plight were located on their own world. Our advent would be discovered all too soon for us. Earth and Mars would not take the risk of having

their signals intercepted and their code deciphered to their ultimate undoing.

There remained but one way in which we could help, and my constant cry was for speed, more speed, and still more speed. Our reaction engines, worked by that wonderful fuel, Rolgar, reached the peak of velocity, indeed I think that at one period we were moving at one hundredth the speed of light.

We could not keep that rate up for long, however—if indeed we ever actually reached it, which I am not prepared to swear since our instruments were not geared to record such tremendous speeds—but presently dropped down to something more moderate. The old saw, "the more haste the less speed" carries weight nowhere more than in interplanetary travel.

All the while the blue disk of Venus grew, and grew, became silver, filled out and out until it covered almost the entire vision surface of the white plaque in the projection room. As time passed and the planet swung nearer, Clinigo became more restless than ever. That calm which should have characterized one of The Three utterly deserted him. He knew not what lay ahead, and because he could not see a little way into the future he felt afraid. Not fear for himself—I think he was past caring whether he lived or died—but fear for Venus, fear of what might even now be happening to his beloved planet.

There came a day when Venus overflowed the vision plate, if one may use the phrase, until the whole band of the tropics, for which we were heading alone occupied all the space. We were not yet able to see the configurations of the continents, however. Not until we pierced the veil of perpetual cloud that masks the surface of the planet would we see their outlines.

One day when we were a hundred and fifty thousand miles above the planet I called a halt. The time had come to drop down through the floor of cloud into the atmospheric envelope. Only the God of the Universe knew what we might find below; only He could say whether we would land alive. Even now the Mercurian armada might have made contact with the Venusian base.

I called Jansca to my side. "Dear one," I said, "keep with me. What there is before us I cannot say, but I fear the worst. It is only right to let you know that we may never live to see another dawn."

Her face paled. I think for the first time she visioned the possibility of our being disrupted into our original atoms as one breaks up a mound of dust with a jet from a hose. But worse than the fear of dissolution in that fashion was the dread of parting. She came a little closer, caught me by both arms—we were alone for the moment in the room—and drew me to her.

"If I have to die I shall at least die like one of Sonjhon blood," she said tremulously, "but even in death I would not be parted from you, my heart. If we must go, we will go together."

I caught her to my heart, and kissed her dear lips, then gently thrust her from me.

My finger wavered over a button on the button-studded plate before me, then with a sudden resolution I pressed it. I had given the signal that was to send us dropping through the floor of cloud to whatever fate awaited us below.

CHAPTER XXIV.

An Armageddon of the Void

SLOWLY the cloud murk parted, slowly the mist lifted, and the land below stood plainly revealed in the light of the hot-house day. A land of strange things, strange colors, and strange plants—Venus, the planet I had planned to reach as the last point of my pleasure trip.

Well, I had my wish, but not in the way I had intended. A pleasure trip had become a honeymoon, and the honeymoon might well be a voyage to death. . . .

We were flying invisible, keeping level by rapid and tricky manipulation of our gravity-plates—some call them screens—for I dare not use the engines. In atmosphere they make a drone that carries a surprising distance.

Balena touched my arm. "That," he said, "should be the place, but I can't see any lights, any reflections of any sort."

"I shouldn't think we could," I told him. "Probably they've masked the camp now. They mightn't even care to run the risk of a Venusian coast-wise craft sighting them. They want to work undisturbed until their armada arrives. However, we've the means to uncover them."

"Arenack"—I turned to him—"any results yet?"

He was trying to get a focus on the instrument I have called "The Crystal Eye," and was finding it, perhaps because of some subtle difference in the atmosphere of Venus, a matter of difficulty. But as I addressed him, he jerked his finger back over his shoulder, gave an exclamation and went on twisting screws.

I glanced at the plaque towards which he had pointed. Something misty showed where a moment before had been only ill-defined nothingness. I fancied I saw buildings; I looked again and was surer.

Then abruptly as Arenack hit the right vibration in the scale the scene sprang into light and things became plain. I saw buildings: I saw men, the odd figures of the Mercurians, and rising gigantic over men and buildings both a mast of some sort that was a spider-web of metal traceries. At the very apex something that I would have called a mirror had it not been egg-shaped, wobbled and spun, throwing gleams of light from it as it moved.

It was something I had never seen before, but that it was a power-station of some sort I had no doubt. I could not be sure whether it was merely a transmitting plant or something far more dangerous, but whatever it was the sooner it was obliterated the better.

I think they must have had some device that warned them of our presence, invisible though we were, for I saw some of the figures abruptly look skywards, and I could almost swear—to such a pitch was my imagination keyed—that I heard them cry out. One look from each of

them, the abrupt white patch of an upturned face, then the figures disappeared inside the buildings, and the egg-shaped mirror on the mast began to wobble more furiously than ever.

The very look of the thing was sinister, so much so that I jumped like a man shocked by electricity.

"Arenack, let them have the heat-ray, and stand by for the atomic jet for use at a moment's notice," I ordered.

The words had hardly left my mouth before the long yellow ray jetted from our bow projector. Some of the buildings glowed in outline for an instant, then collapsed into their own ashes. But that infernal mirror still wobbled; the mast itself seemed intact, and even as I looked a pale blue light glowed in its center, then suddenly shot out towards us.

Remembering our invisibility I think they must have aimed at random, for no doubt their locators had been destroyed by our heat ray. Nevertheless they shot amazingly straight. The deadly blue beam came so close that we felt the shock of it as it cut the air above us, then like an avenging sword it cut the arc of the sky into dripping segments.

The *Cosmos* staggered as though buffeted by a force titanic beyond all conception, and for an instant I thought she was going to heel over.

Then I saw through our vision plate one of our supporting ships glowing like a blue sun. The vision lasted no longer than one would take to count five; the ship seemed to lose shape, passed into a molten stream, a metallic rain that dropped upon the humid earth beneath.

"Give them the atomic gun, Arenack," I snarled. "We must risk it now, take the chance of what might happen."

But I should have known I could rely on Arenack, that he knew what was doing. A hissing sound as the water leaped out, a trembling as the disintegrating vibrations rushed to join it in mid-air, then a rushing stream of fury like the dust molecules in a beam of sunlight. The kick of the explosion flung us back, and when we looked again there was no longer any mast or mirror or even anything that we could identify as land, only a scorched and disrupted wilderness, torn, scarred and ripped open by the heel of the atomic jet.

At the cost of one of our ships we had destroyed the one known base, but now the question arose were there any others of which we had not known.

Since we could not scour a planet ourselves, I decided the best thing to do was to head for Shangun, and warn the authorities of what they might have to expect. I gathered that they might not be altogether defenceless, and since I wished to run no unnecessary risks I decided after talking the matter over with Clinigo and Jansca that we had better start transmitting so they would know we were coming.

AFTER being so long isolated from the rest of the Universe Shangun went mad when the communication was once more restored, and the infection no doubt spread right round the planet. They could but believe that the menace itself had been removed for ever. Even the guarded warnings that came through did little to dampen their wild enthusiasm.

In extenuation it must be remembered that though their planet was the only one so far invaded, none of the Venusians had had any encounters with the Mercurians; they possessed no first-hand knowledge of the powers wielded by the aggressors, and the only base so far located had been established at a point remote from civilization.

Indeed, until the advent of the *Cosmos*, the Venusians themselves did not know such a base existed.

Yet when we began transmitting, telling in detail the story of our efforts and how they had culminated, even that was taken as proof that we had conquered finally. If we had not, how was it, they reasoned, that we were sailing calmly towards the capital of the confederation, victorious and unharmed?

Shangun, a city of soft twilight tones, of lights subdued and eye-entrancing after the glare of the Martian red lands, had for once outdone itself. It was alive with lights and flags; it was shouting joyously the incarnate voice of a planet snatched from worse than death. The very lovliness of it, the wild abandon of its people cut me to the quick. How could we convince such ones that this was no conclusive victory, merely a skirmish by the way, with the red, riper scenes of carnage yet to come?

Clinigo was our last hope. If he could not bring his people to a realization of what still lay ahead of them, no one could. But as I looked at his face I seemed to read there and in his eyes doubt of his own ability to do any such thing. A troubled man was Clinigo that day, torn between love of his planet and anger at the folly of the people. A pleasant bird-like people, I have said before, sweet and charming to know, but broken reeds on which to lean in a crisis. Yet the end showed how little one can judge another's qualities until the need calls them into action.

We dropped the *Cosmos* until she floated a hundred feet above the ground and let her drift gently to the landing slips. I would not let them close the grips over her hull, however, for I had an ugly foreboding that the worst had still to come and we might yet have to rise at a moment's notice.

Clinigo descended, leaving the rest of us in the ship. We refused all invitations to land, nevertheless the Venusians clustered round the departure platforms—they could not come nearer, for I would not have any gangways run out—and cheered us, called to us, chattered, laughed, threw us flowers and congratulations.

It was as if Fate had thrown the gage and taken up the challenge without delay. While Clinigo was still wrangling with the local authorities, trying to convince them of the danger hanging over them, and finding it no easy task; while the laughing, loving people about us were singing their delight of our presence, things were going on which was presently to become manifest.

The first intimation came in a startling fashion.

We had been transmitting—to where I am not sure—and the televox machines on the landing stage were shouting some news of the hour when all of a sudden everything went still and dead. All communication stopped in mid-note, as though temporarily paralyzed. Alarmed, we swung our eyes skywards.

For a time we could see nothing, only our four remaining colleagues maneuvering against the ceiling of cloud. Then—it was as though someone had ripped the sky open with a bright steel blade—the cloud rack parted, and through the opening one by one, brazenly disdaining concealment, came the eighty ships or so of what we learnt later was the Mercurian armada. They had been closer than we thought.

Glistening golden shapes, the smallest of the size of the *Cosmos*, they slowly settled down, secure in their own overwhelming power. Had we remained inactive it is hard to say what might or might not have happened, but as always nervousness precipitated the conflict.

One of our four ships, the closest to the descending host, suddenly whirled, flashing its heat-ray as it moved. The ray landed on the nose of the foremost spaceship; there came a red glow, and almost instantly an explosion set the air rocking. What it was I cannot say; perhaps the Mercurian was carrying explosive material; at any rate for the second time our puny heat ray, almost by accident it seemed, was the spark to touch off the powder and blow the ship to fragments.

It touched off more than that with a vengeance! The air-blast that set the fleet rocking had hardly died away; the fragments of the broken craft were still falling even when its fellows, like hawks suddenly disturbed, wheeled and almost in the twinkling of an eye had formed a circle in the center of which floated our supporting guard-ships. One moment we were dazzled by that whirling circle of gold, the next the whole visible round of the cloud-wrapped sky had turned that unearthly electric blue, and the very heavens seemed to be raining molten metal on us.

THE instant the first blue ray leaped out, I had swung over the levers that sealed our hull, almost in the same motion I pushed the button that rang the control-room to activity. We rose so quickly that we were nearly swung off our feet, and Jansca was thrown against me heavily. I caught her to save her plunging to the floor. . .

I have often wondered since if that action was the means of our salvation. The roof above us seemed to split asunder, a searing blue ray passed so close to us that we could feel the thrill and shock of it, and then somehow we seemed to be tipped out into free air, and to be dropping, dropping. Jansca I still held close to me, and it was that that saved her life, I really believe.

Coming out of the void we had laid aside our space-suits, but I had donned instead my service uniform—put it down to that same uneasy feeling that would not permit the *Cosmos* to be moored fast. Tucked in a roll at the back of the collar was that tiny, light yet strong parachute that every Guard wears as a matter of course when maneuvering in the air. Its weight does not incommode one, for it weighs little more than a silk pocket handkerchief, but it is built of a material that will take the strain of a normal man without ripping.

As we dropped I felt the tug about my waist as the light cords tightened, and we floated instead of falling. We landed in a tumbled heap, the breath shaken out of our bodies, and for a space we did not move. At last I strugged to my feet, found my knife in its sheath, and cut the cords away. Jansca lay very still on the ground and a wild fear that she was dead seized on me. But she moved, took a deep breath, and:

"Thank God, you're safe!" she gasped.

"But you. . .are you hurt?"

She shook her head. "No, only the breath knocked out of me. But what happened. . .?"

I could not say. I could only look about me. The *Cosmos* lay some distance away from us, all that was left of her. Her rear half had been fused so that it must have run like molten butter, and her forward part pitched down nose first and now lay half buried in the soft soil. Fumes and smoke rose from it.

We had fallen some distance outside the city, but our fall had been marked, and now people came running to our assistance. With their help we searched, sick at heart, knowing from the beginning that we would find no living soul amongst the wreckage.

By some unaccountable workings of the laws of chance we had been standing in the one spot in the ship that spelt safety. A foot one way and the ray would have fused us, a foot the other and we would have been tumbled into the shattered forward part, and been incinerated with the others. As it was when the two halves separated we were tumbled out into the air in the same way that a housewife will crack an egg-shell and tumble its contents into the pan. What miracle, what blind working of fate it was that threw us clear of the blazing forward end I cannot say even to this day.

Sick and weary, trembling with the horror of it all, we stood and looked at each other, our faces wan and ghastly in the light of destruction. High above us the golden fleet of the Mercurian invaders still wheeled and dipped, but now the blue rays were sweeping over Shangun, and that city of wonder and beauty was dissolving like ice in the sunlight.

Soon, if this went on, there would be nowhere in the whole round of the planet where a man could lie with his roof above his head and know the night would bring him rest and peace, or dawn the pleasures of a new day.

CHAPTER XXV.

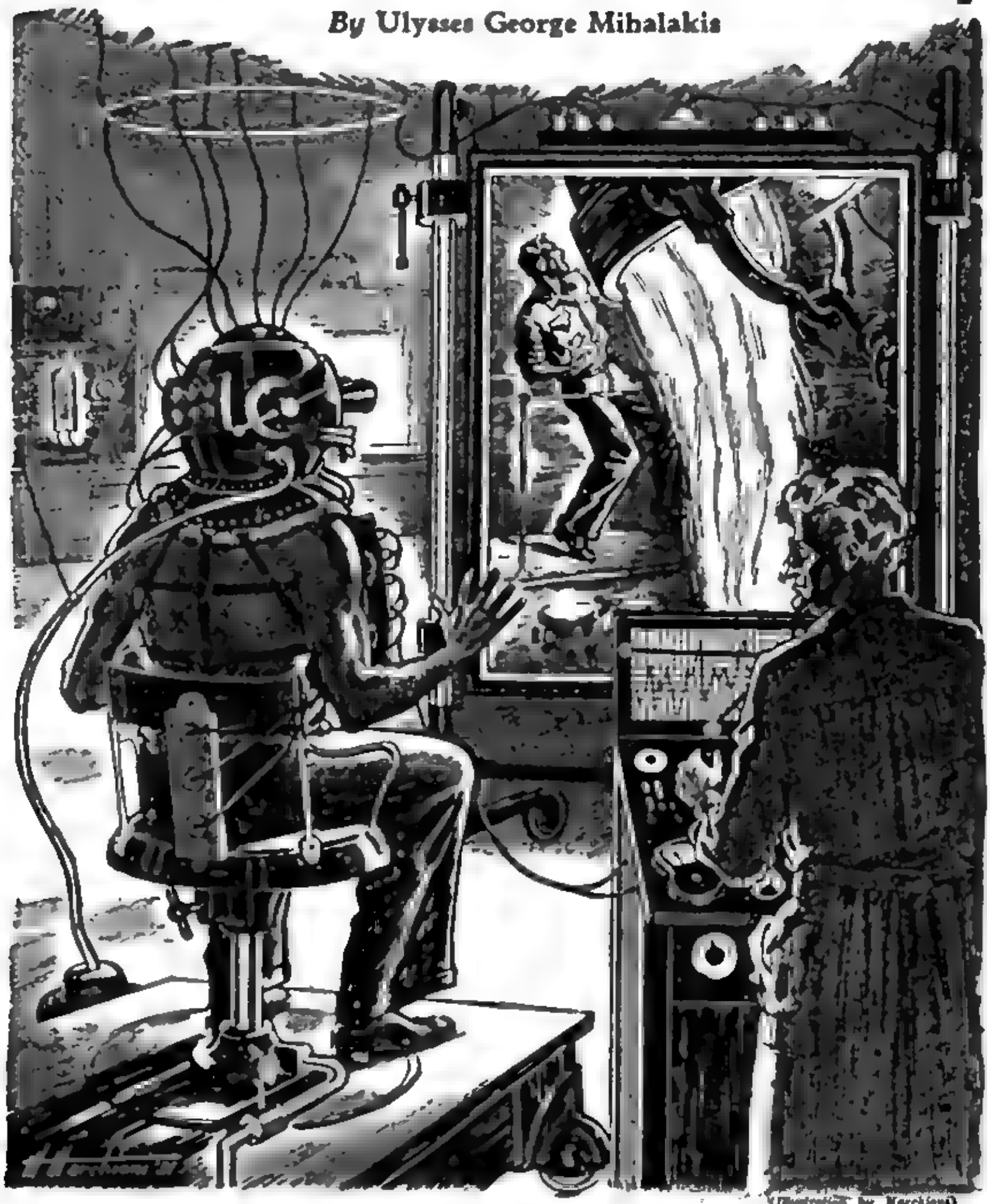
Ad Astra

THE little group of people—ourselves and the Venusians who had run to our aid—remained staring like men frozen. The stupendous malignity of it all had temporarily paralyzed us, and left us without power of speech or movement. We could only stand gazing in awe-struck horror, with eyes round with apprehension, at each

(*Concluded on Page* 570)

The Machine of Destiny

By Ulysses George Mihalakis



(Illustration by Marchioni)

There was a terrific flash—a great white column appeared beside me, emanating scorching blasts of heat.

FOREWORD

INSOFAR as pine trees were concerned—white or otherwise—White Pine County of Nevada could boast of none. In fact, it was obviously devoid of not only trees, but of any means of growing same. The valleys were dry and desert; the hills bleak and forlorn—the entire district forsaken and disowned.

Of course it was not the attractiveness of the landscape that brought me to the county seat of Ely, but I *was* in the midst—or rather, in the lead—of the stampede for the site of the crash as it was relayed to us through KPO of San Francisco from the hunt-ship, *Invulnerable*.

Incidentally, having been jack-rabbit hunting, slaughtering—as you will—I did notice, now and then, the curiously acting search-ship as it wound about one vicinity in tight spirals. Its search was centered about Lobo Mountain, a few miles from where I straddled a mound of earth picking off the long streaks of grey which I knew to be my prey.

I had heard of the disappearance of the passenger-plane, *Falcon*, as had everyone else in White Pine, but to think that the *Invulnerable* had located it so near Ely was worth investigating. And so it was that I took a prolonged squint through my grimy binoculars in its general direction.

At precisely that moment, the pilot in the search-plane sighted me and came toward me, zooming with a frightful roar almost upon me. A small wad of paper wrapped around a bolt almost struck me, but quite missed, fortunately, landing in the sage some yards up the valley. I salvaged it and read the terse note:

> *Falcon wrecked this morning is two miles from you, "Alley" Canyon; No signs of life—please investigate. No place to land—will soon send out search-party from Ely—do what you can.*
>
> *Pilot, Invulnerable.*

I peered upward and waved an arm in assent. The ship immediately turned its nose toward Ely, some thirty miles away.

A road led directly to the base of the massive mound into whose ominous side the small canyon, Alley, seemed but a mouth to hell. My Ford, once new but now ancient, made the pull in wonderful style and by nine o'clock, according to my equally ancient watch, I came to a small bowl-like opening against whose side I found a conglomerate mass of wreckage. The final half-mile I had to trek in haste, and had I not known the entire vicinity thereabouts, I believe that the remaining searchers would find but one more carcass in the lot of the dead.

At any rate, in the incomprehensible blackness of the bowl, I finally came to the conclusion that the *Falcon* had the ill-fortune to nose squarely into the precipitous side of Lobo Mountain itself. This you all know. In fact, the story thus far is probably by now well known to the whole world—how every member of the crew and every passenger had been found dead.

Of the six that had been aboard, not a single person still lived! Whatever streak of fate had caused this wholesale slaughter to come to pass merely by the neglect of the navigator, I do not know; but destiny had made a perfect job of it. My flashlight disclosed not one trace of warmth in the entire six bodies. And so I squatted upon a clump of sage some yards from the mangled mass meditated while waiting for the coming of the rest.

There was one young girl of rather slight build—still at her seat—a section of duralumin having pierced her left temple and its jagged edge still protruded from her forehead; two young men—one of them a veritable giant—lay mangled beyond recognition; a middle aged- white-collared individual who had met his end somewhat after the style of the young girl—except that his was much more horrible to contemplate; and lastly, the two pilots, one of whom had been catapulted almost entirely through the glass observation-ports to the front.

It was simple—all were dead—but there was one thing that bothered me. It was the sight of a small portable typewriter of recent make around whose platen-roll, a page of white paper with a mass of writing seemed to tug at my pro-

U. G. MIHALAKIS

THERE is no thing more fascinating, intriguing, mysterious, and yet terrible to us than our unknown future. We realize that often our lives consist of a series of what appears to be blind accident. We are thrown from one accident into another.

Yet there is doubt but that a master mind could see in this confusion an order, that cause and effect follow each other, and were the causes of events fully known, the effects or the future events could be predicted.

But would such a power of prognostication be a blessing to us? Aren't we better off, fighting our way blindly through our lives, and having the future appear gradually, moment by moment, not given to us suddenly? Our author treats upon this theme in a novel and stimulating manner in the present story.

digious bump of curiosity. I wondered what the young girl could have been writing—assuming that the machine had been in the hands of the girl previous to the wreck—and so I found myself laboring over the terse sentences to the dim light of my half-dead flashlight.

What I did read startled me. I knew that I was wronging someone, but I soon had collected the eleven preceding pages that littered the wreckage—for this final page had been marked "12". With trembling hands I folded them into a compact bundle and wrapped it in my huge, red bandana. This I secreted beneath a boulder halfway down the canyon.

When the rest of the searchers approached some two hours later, during which time I had drawn forth the corpses and stretched them alongside each other and covered them with a section of canvas, I related everything that I knew of the crash—excepting the twelve pages of writing that I had hidden.

The rest you know.

Four days later I left Ely for another hunt. And it was during this trip that I hurriedly made my way over my previous route and to that solitary boulder and rescued the dozen pages from beneath the folds of my crimson handkerchief.

I have read them twice. I am ignorant of whether it is fiction or the delusion of the brain of some mad author. I offer it to you—you know the exact circumstances under which I obtained it. No evidence can be acquired that could possibly incriminate me for not disclosing these facts previously. I will state that this entire tale is a product of my imagination, and though I did find a typewriter in that wreck, there was not a word of writing in it. In the event that this very sentence is disputed; in case I am asked why I have written the preceding five or six lines, I will merely state that I have written them in order to make my tale more convincing, even as I write the following few lines with the same intention. In other words, this is not entirely fiction—these are *facts* that I give!

* * * *

December 10th, 1934:

Electricity was in the very air itself. The atmosphere reeked of that *stuff* that prognosticated trouble—ominousness. What was it that suggested evil! What was this evident though invisible, immaterial *thing?*

Well, breakfast did not taste so different this morning even though it was merely rolls and coffee. I must needs retain my last few cents for food to fill me on the morrow.

Hopefully I turned to the want-ad section of the morning paper, hoping against hope that something would turn up. Something did attract me:

> WANTED, big man. Individual with heart not desired. One with "gizzard" preferred. Excellent opportunity for right party. Call Mo. 7631 between 6 & 7 P.M. today.

I smiled to myself and re-read it. There was a "something" about the very aspect of the ad that not only proved attracting, but also repugnant to the sixth sense that dominates our instinct.

But I did need work—that was undeniable—and at six-fifteen that same evening I found myself wondering whether I had a heart after all—or was it really a *gizzard?*

At any rate, I dialled Montrose 7631 and awaited a response to the phone-buzz. A terse voice, though dulled and softened with age came to me over the line.

"I am replying to the ad," I explained. "My name is William Noone, unmarried, am six feet two inches in height and weigh two hundred and five pounds in a light suit. Twenty-six years old—and I'm willing to consider anything within reason and the law. My schooling is limited to a high-school education. I would like an interview if you believe I can fill the bill."

I paused and awaited a reply.

"All right!" it snapped back. "How soon can you be at the corner of Nineteenth Avenue and Sloat Boulevard?"

"Thirty-five minutes," I calculated.

"Fine. You will be picked up at the northeast corner in forty minutes by a man driving a grey Cadillac sedan. What sort of clothes are you wearing?" I wondered whether he would pick me up himself.

"A blue-serge suit and light-grey Stetson—tan shoes, small mustache." I added the last so that there would be no error whatsoever.

"Good! Good bye." And I heard the click of the receiver.

In exactly one half hour I stepped from the No. 12, west-bound trolley and took post in plain sight at the curb-stone of the corner.

Precisely as I had been informed, a massive sixteen-cylinder Cadillac sedan zoomed to a stop directly before me.

"William Noone?" asked the ancient behind the wheel.

"Yes!" I said eagerly. "Shall I get in?"

"Right!" and he thrust open the door. I clambered into the car and sank into the luxuriously upholstered seat beside him.

I paid close attention to our route as we made our way up Nineteenth Avenue. We had hardly proceeded more than a dozen blocks when he veered from the avenue into a driveway. It was dark and I could hardly make out the exact location, but I did notice that the place was immense—the grounds expensive.

The mansion was located about one hundred feet back of the pavement and almost out of sight and hearing of the throbbing traffic of Nineteenth Avenue. Into its lobby I was ushered, up a flight of carpeted stairs to the second floor and then to the rear.

I was nervous. It is impossible to deny that. I rejoiced at the idea that the author of the advertisement seemed to take me earnestly and there was every probability that I would be given work. If he had not thought me fitting for his job, would he have gone to the trouble of calling for me in such an expensive car?

But I felt down-hearted. I felt tired. I could not fathom my uneasy feeling and did not endeavour to, except that I was conscious of its existence.

And finally I was led into a huge laboratory that must have occupied the entire rear of the second floor. The very first sight of it struck me as a place out of spirit with the ad. A few

brief minutes hence I was even willing to acknowledge the statement that I was a possessor of a gizzard instead of a heart—but now, I was sure that I had a heart after all. For I feared something within the massive room. Or was it the chair that stood upon a dais in the corner with a helmet-like contraption upon the seat?

To each side of a small desk that stood along the wall to my right and to the rear of it, a conglomerate mass of scientific apparatus including benches, sinks, control-panels and motor-generator sets seemed to clog the very atmosphere.

I seated myself opposite the flat-topped desk and awaited the proposal of the old man. My air was expectant—I was tensed.

"The eccentricity of the ad was merely simulated in order not to have too great a number answering it." His voice was level and unhurried and his words precise. "I must admit, though, that you must be possessed of considerable nerve to go through with my proposition.

"Assuming that you have the required amount of nerve, I will tell you that I want your aid in an experiment by which I hope to check a machine that I have invented.

"I assure you that there is absolutely no danger whatsoever of bodily harm. And listen closely while I explain what I wish of you. For this I will pay you one hundred dollars in cash, and the entire time it will take will be something like fifteen minutes.

"I wish you to permit me to look into your brain with the *Augur*. With it I shall be able to predict certain events in your future life. I will pick out a few of those events and their dates. At the time that they occur, I will check the information given to me by the machine and I will then see if it is correctly adjusted. That is all I require of you. I have so far done that exact thing to two other applicants and I desire to test one more.

"The events that I shall pick in your life will occur at a time one year or less from today. In that manner we will see what accidents, if any, you are to undergo. The dates of the occurrences I will check with the figures submitted by my machine. Hence we will find whether or not its computations are correct. What do you think of my proposition? I have stated the main facts briefly."

An Unusual Offer

I HAVE read much scientific stuff in my time. Although I had so far really considered it good stuff and instructive as well as entertaining, I had never accepted much of what I read. And so it was for the moment I was plunged into an inarticulate reverie.

His proposition had been bluntly stated and evidently he would have nothing to do with one who did not agree absolutely to his plan. So I found myself endeavouring to utter a "yes" in spite of the fact that my vocal cords denied me that privilege. I did gasp it at length and peered deeply into the man's old eyes.

"Yes, what?" he asked.

"I mean—I accept," I said, though I had not the faintest of ideas of what I really did accept. The fact that the thing to be done was on the square and the pay was enormous absorbed me entirely. Truthfully speaking, in the straits that I was in at the moment, I would have accepted under any circumstances. For my fingers could produce but a few cents should my pockets be turned inside out.

"Fine!" he snapped, as if the idea was repugnant to him. "But I went it to be understood that I shall not be responsible for whatever may occur as a result of my examination."

"What could occur?" I inquired.

"A million and one things. But we must not dwell upon that unpleasant subject at present. You have a glimmering of what I wish you to do for a hundred dollars. If you are ready, I will don appropriate dress and begin immediately. But before I do ask you to submit yourself to me, we must take in every single possibility of failure in our contract and adopt check-measures for it. For instance if I discover, during the examination, that you are to become deceased before that year has expired, I am willing to undergo the expense of your living until that time is up—merely to check the moment of your passing with the machine. That, I believe, will assure me that the date upon the chart and the actual date of your death do not correspond because of any coincidence. Now, do you understand?"

I did not like the flatness with which he said the last words, but when one is broke and the new year but a few weeks off, besides disowning his heart, he is tempted to swallow twice before making his hesitation evident. So I let the thing pass with an equally flat "yes".

"That is the instance where the 'gizzard' comes into play. You will admit that it will take an enormous amount of nerve for a person to accept a weekly sum, assured that before the year is gone he will be dead. As for the experiment itself, it requires absolutely no nerve whatsoever. You shall neither be injured physically, nor jarred mentally."

"All merely to check your machine?"

"Yes," he said. "We have said that enough. You understand the probable obligations you will be under. That is all. You shall merely receive orders to report any extraordinary occurrence in your life to me. In the event that you are luckless enough to be doomed to die before the end of the year, you will derive the advantage of not being forced to work—I will compensate you with one hundred additional dollars a week. But that chance is remote—the chances are that you will not even be injured. It is even possible that you will not undergo a single change. But that is not probable; I asked for a big man, because in general, they are the ones upon whom fate thrusts the breaks of life."

So far, I had said little. Not that I had nothing to say, but that I feared speaking lest he withdraw his offer. Really, my head seemed to throb at the immensity of his plan. And I further startled myself by vainly hoping that I would be "destined to die" before the end of one year. It would be very profitable.

That I had no confidence whatsoever in his machine, I knew. But the business end of it did appeal to me, so I readily wrote out my name

upon a prepared statement and pocketed my copy with a hundred dollar note.

"And if you don't mind, Doctor," I said as I felt the crispness of the money in my pocket, (his name was *Doctor Magyarkanisza*) "tell me what the other applicants said to your plan—surely, you received more than two applications!"

"Frankly, Mr. Noone," he said, "I will tell you, though I don't wish you to be discomfited by my statements. Six have applied. Two accepted; two took their departure quietly, yet with the idea that I was crazy; one suddenly remembered that he had and must complete an appointment with a dentist; and the last told me plainly to go to the devil! I have received more than forty phone calls. I made them all abrupt and to the point. Those whose voices did not appeal to me, I merely neglected. Those that seemed hopeful, I looked into. And yours concludes it.

"These people overlooked the fact that though my machine may change their lives in a small scale, if destiny doomed them to die at a certain moment, a hundred machines like my own could alter that time not one second! That would be a fatalist's concept of my requirements—but the few I spoke to seemed to be quite stubborn."

For a few minutes he peered at me. His eyes seemed to bore into my very soul as I pondered over the events and awaited his signal to prepare for the experiment. Then quite as if he had been reading my very mind, he snapped out with an impatient gesture:

"I have invented the *Augur*. Mechanically I have mastered the secret of prediction. It is perfect, as far as theory and construction is concerned. I want merely to check its accuracy. You can well imagine the advantage derived from the existence of a machine of this sort!

"Briefly, my plan is to put you beneath its lens and find an event in your life that is not too far off. I will note the time it occurs by means of a graph. Then, the exact instant shall be recorded. On that instant, I will be present to verify the occurrence. The place of your fortune or misfortune I will know, should my invention be successful. If not, you will be in no way affected."

IT was quite evident that we would go through with the experiment, for he suddenly turned and began preparations. Phials were assembled. Peculiar odors assailed my nostrils. With scarcely more than a passing glance, he directed me to doff my coat.

I did.

"Now," he said as he took the finished solution in a small phial—a deep-violet hued mixture, "off with your shirt and all underwear to the waist."

Hesitatingly, I obeyed, the cold atmosphere of the laboratory piercing me to the marrow.

I was led to a bench where, first with a pair of hair-clippers, the hair about a portion of my chest was closely cropped, then with the aid of a razor, closely shaved. The icy feel of the clippers was not reassuring, but I restrained a shiver as he touched my chest with the razor.

"It took me some time to perfect the machine," he said as he led me to a chair near the heater-vent from which issued a warm blast of air. "You may be seated here where you won't be uncomfortable until I conclude the preparations. It won't take me long, and you can lend an ear if you wish—I'll see how much of the contraption I can explain.

"To you, the explanation will appear as does a wire screen to the eye when held at the distance of about an inch. But at its conclusion, I hope to have that screen withdrawn to a distance, where it may be contemplated as a whole—you will have a slight glimmering of the internal operation of the *Augur*. The knowledge that may rest within your brain at present will not be sufficient to cope with the technicalities of a direct explanation, so I will attempt only a mere picture. If I can impart to you that much, I am content to let things rest, for I am sure you have long ago begun to think me crazy.

"I completed my last divisional experiment some years ago—four, I believe. Here—" he opened a drawer and withdrew a chart from his desk, the parchment being old and yellowed.

I recognized it as a picture of the human brain as it rests within the box. There were two views, one from the side and one top-view. Connected to it by a series of small lines, I found also a spherical object that I recognized as the eye.

He continued his explanation, much as if I were a pupil. I listened with undivided attention, but I doubt if I knew as much when I heard his last word as when I heard his first. His utterance seemed but a mass of technicalities.

As a whole, I gleaned a half-dead idea as to what he wished to tell me. I comprehended that the screen was being drawn away from the pupil of my eye, and I understood it vaguely as a whole.

As he spoke, he pointed out that portion of the brain or eye to which he referred.

"The idea centers about that section of the brain that physiology calls the cerebrum. And even penetrating further into the individual portions of that very cerebrum, we come to a sensual center called 'the seat of consciousness'. Here we find that *subliminal self* in man that may be the cause of dreams. It is that which prompts us to possess instincts; that added 'sixth' sense. Non-technically, it seems that what the individual has seen—what he has experienced—is enrolled, recorded upon a film much after the style of the moving-picture camera. This is retained in a portion of the cerebrum upon that side of the longitudinal fissure that we can call 'the right side'. In turn, even boring down to more infinitesimal proportions, this '*seat of consciousness*' is somewhere in the vicinity of the fissure of Rolando.

"Here we find the seat of 'memory'. Recorded upon films, scenes and figures, reflected into the pupil of the eye and brought to the brain by that retina-artery in the centre of the optic nerve, are stored here. I see that you are rather at a loss to follow me, so I believe I should cut everything short and get down to the point.

"I am trying to tell you that all things seen by the eyes are taken to this portion of the brain—the visions forming an image by the *crystalline lens* which is fastened to the pupil by the suspensory ligament. By changes of its convexity, accommo-

dation for images at different distances and *time* is effected."

He halted abruptly and turned toward the further corner of the room, motioning me to follow.

I obeyed, approaching the small dais upon which stood the metal chair. The peculiar helmet was taken from the seat and I climbed to its level and sat down. I noticed that the entire chair rested upon a swivel and could be swung about in any direction.

The helmet held in his hands seemed not unlike a diver's helmet with a visor-like door attached. To this visor, a pair of small ports were fastened so that it appeared much like a pair of binoculars protruding above the level of an old time helmet, with the visor raised. A twisted mass of wires extended from the top of the skull to the ceiling. And in addition to this, a curious breast-plate extended downward from the neck.

This entire affair was, in time, adjusted about my head and shoulders and strapped securely to my body with a series of small leather bands. Completing the adjustment, the doctor resumed his talk:

"As a moving-picture film winds into a roll carrying on it whatever is within its field of vision, so acts the brain in a like manner through the eye and the optic nerve. That is the entire theory—we are going to unravel the past that is stored in this corner of the brain—we will read it. The idea is not new—it is old. But until the coming of the *Augur* it has been impossible to utilize it."

The helmet was becoming cumbersome and I wished he would snap out of his technical trance and get down to business.

"And upon this point I worked until I could devise a filtering substance with which I could read not only the present and the past—but I have waded into the future! The idea was simply stupendous! For you probably know that for every event in your life, an infinitesimal change will also occur in your brain. It is the work of the *Augur* to step ahead and find this change in the composition of your brain!

The Accident!

"A PICTURE of what the brain sees is projected against a diaphragm and amplified. In turn, this is relayed to a screen. The scenes that appear here I can trace backward or forward—into the past or the future until that moment when the heart ceases to beat and the brain is dead. Then, a series of unintelligible lines mark the screen—possibly in a year or so—say about 1941, I will be even able to read these lines—then the secret of death will be bared! Imagine! Hence it is a matter but of precise focussing to determine the moment of any irregularity in the construction of the brain—or the time of its decease!

"But coming back to you, I am going to find what your brain will disclose. I will take the time and place and be at the aforesaid place to check everything recorded.

"I will permit you to watch the screen through the binoculars for a time, then I will take it from you so that anything of misfortune will be known only by myself. If you are doomed to meet with an accident, it would merely serve to rattle you to see it. All right:—"

It was long and tiresome, but I stood it well. Now that the mass of technical dogma had vanished into my brain and there was little more to listen to, I was interested. I watched the doctor through the open visor as he pressed a button upon the surface of the helmet and a rubber nozzle was thrust unceremoniously into my mouth.

"Close your teeth about the hose and breathe through it—keep your mouth shut tight," he directed. I obeyed, and was directed to push my face slightly forward where my nostrils were grasped securely by another rubber contraption. Now I could breathe only through my mouth. Then, a singular sensation—one of clamminess. It frightened me dreadfully and I was inclined to leap into the air and run screaming from that chair—it was something upon my wrist. A wire!

And before I could follow my impulse, the visor was thrown shut and a stream of some very fine fluid spat directly into both my open eyes. A few moments elapsed as my smarting eyes continued to feel the stream pouring against them. Then, as the rising fluid filled the helmet, into my ears and hair, all became quiet.

Finally, I felt a reverberating tap upon the head and knew that that was the signal to open my eyes. I did so.

Immediately, I felt a tingling sensation at the chest where the cold plate came in contact with my flesh. Although the stuff burned my eyes dreadfully, I saw nothing; I was merely conscious of a sensation of extreme discomfort.

Then, a light—or, to be more exact, a picture on the screen in front of me. A strange scene!

I recognized it—the massive main-portals of the Soulé Steel Foundries where I once worked—years ago. Yes, I recognized Army and Twenty-Second Street! The very same portals! It was as if I really stood before them, gazing upward at the huge letters denoting the name!

The portals were nearing me! I was walking through them! The massive structure loomed enormous and forbidding, but I hesitatingly made my way directly into the yards; into the huge foundry! Onward, past streaking furnaces; below traveling cranes; by sweating, cursing six-foot Mexicans working the blast-punches. Into the very heart of the cauldron of machinery—to its very centre! Then, a blur—as if I were drunk. And now, as I peered eagerly at my surroundings, I found that I stood upon a small steel runway, some forty feet above the level of the earthen floor upon which pigmies played with flashing cups of hot, blood-red coffee!

I recognized the scene—I had been here before! I had worked in this very section operating the massive punches; clearing slag from the pots for four dollars a day!

Then, as I stood upon the precarious foot-path of steel, feeling quite out of place—a million miles from my true environment—there was a terrible crash! A great, white column appeared beside me, emanating scorching blasts of heat. I leaped backward to escape from that fiery demon, for I knew that a potful of molten metal

had overturned in the hands of some crane-man above me. But too late. There was a pause of intense inactivity and then a black monster struck me. The object hit a glancing blow upon my right shoulder, its rounded bottom striking the steel runway and tearing it loose from its fastenings—crashing it squarely into the midst of a half dozen or so sweating laborers below.

All vanished! Darkness reigned again. The picture had been wiped from my consciousness and from the screen in front of me and I was once more aware that I was seated upon the chair with the peculiar helmet upon my head.

The sickly fluid had penetrated into my ears and felt as uncomfortable as though I had fallen into a mud-puddle.

I sat in this state indefinitely. It seemed eons before light was again released into the blackness of the helmet's interior. Then I heard a trickle of something or other and in a few moments the fluid had been taken from the helmet and the visor raised. Then I was at the wash-basin, washing the purple-colored stuff from my ears and head.

The doctor was busied arranging pages of a curious paper and jotting down figures and calculations.

"Well," I said as I blotted the last drop of water from my face, "what does it say?"

He remained silent for a few moments as he reproduced a few numbers upon another sheet from the graph-page. I smilingly awaited his response, half-hoping that the old fool would find me destined to die during the year so that I could deprive maximum advantage from this curious contract.

All thoughts vanished, though, as I recalled the scene I witnessed while encased by the helmet. It most certainly was astonishing! Then I was awakened by the voice of the Doctor.

"You will receive, promptly, one hundred dollars a week until the time of your decease, or if that is not to occur, until one year from today, I will discontinue that salary." It was brief.

"What? Does your *Augur* say that I'm due to kick off before the year's gone?" Now that things turned out as I hoped, I found little comfort in it!

"My advice to you," he said quietly, "is to enjoy yourself freely during the following few months. Also, begin praying that this experiment is a failure."

"Why, doctor," I said enthusiastically, "I'll be damned if I won't even *pray* for one hundred a week!" I took the crisp hundred-note from my pocket and eyed it unbelievingly. Then I looked at him wryly. I was convinced that either I was dreaming and would presently awaken, or the old codger was as crazy as hell and really thought I would die before the year was up.

"And for your sake, for the sake of that Collins individual to whom you are betrothed, keep away from the Soulé Steel Foundries during the next few weeks. If you can do this, you can assume that the *Augur* was a failure and you may not die soon. You saw what occurred—*for God's sake, keep away from that place!*"

His voice had that tinge of horror in it that accompanies violence and death. His face was pale—ghastly! For a moment as I looked at him, I doubted his sanity—I doubted my sanity—I doubted everything!

"And not only that," he said in a voice more like a hiss than anything else, "don't leave San Francisco under any circumstances during the next year! Don't go near the Soulé outfit; don't be a damned fool! It will be terrible—" he shuddered.

THE sheaf of papers he folded carefully and placed within a drawer which he locked. The key he pocketed, bringing forth the huge roll of currency that I had seen previously. Looking at it for a few moments, he handed me another hundred dollar note and again pocketed the roll.

"There's your salary for the next week; I will be out of town. Commencing from the second consecutive week, I will have the century-note forwarded promptly each Monday. You will receive it in a plain white envelope with no return address upon it."

"But, doc," I demurred, "aren't you going to tell me when I'm due to kick off?"

"No, because your life is too short, and you probably will try suicide long before your time comes—or you will die of worry. I will say, though, that it won't be for some time yet, so you need not worry—just enjoy yourself!"

I was perturbed, to say the least. All thought that I was in a trance vanished as I tasted the very realistic food placed before me in exchange for a portion of the money I had been given.

And, hungry? *I was famished!* I regaled myself to the very limit of capacity and with an ungentlemanly toothpick in my mouth, left the third-rate hash-house and made my way sluggishly up the brilliantly-lit avenue.

Why, merely a few hours ago I felt the hesitancy of spending an infinitesimal thirty-five cents for dinner, and here I was, my pocket heavy with silver coins and my wallet literally wallowing in currency! It was uncanny! I had done practically no work! In fact, I had been entertained with a little lecture and a movie-reel to boot!

That I would never see that hundred-a-week I had been promised, I knew. I wondered what developments would turn up in regards to the two hundred dollars I now possessed. Of course there was something shady about it. I believed rigidly in the hackneyed idea that "nobody gets anything for nothing."

I thought momentarily of leaving the city and going elsewhere, where I could readily acquire work; but, no! That would not do. I would stick it out and if, in a month, nothing turned up, I would leave. In the meantime, I would take care not to spend too much and of course, I would always be upon the lookout for work.

I faithfully perused a half-dozen directories, old and new, in search of the doctor's name—and I found, at last, exactly nothing!

Then, do you blame me for trying to dis-remember everything?

I continued to read carefully the want-ad columns of the three principal papers, but found nothing in reference to that ad my erstwhile employer had inserted.

Then, one evening some days after this occurence, a thought suddenly struck me squarely upon the face: That man had mentioned my fiancée! How in heaven did he know that her name was Collins! I inquired into the matter. Had anyone made any anonymous calls? Had any phone-calls come in at all?

But, no! There was no reason for me to believe that that doctor had found the name of my fiancée other than through that damnable machine!

Two weeks passed and I had gradually forgotten my curious experience when one day a long, white envelope was thrust unceremoniously before my eyes.

It was in the hand of the house-manager.

"Mister William Noone," he said pronouncing my name slowly and clearly. "It came today, registered; I signed for it," and he handed it to me.

Frightened almost beyond belief, I hurriedly thanked him and repaired to my room where I tremblingly tore the envelope open. *It contained nothing other than a new, crisp, one-hundred-dollar note!* That bit of paper felt as a hot slab of metal in my hand! It seared my very soul! I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my abdomen—and that feeling remained as long as my consciousness pronounced that accursed word, *Augur*! I looked up the word in two unabridged dictionaries and my face paled at the definition.

I had one wonderful time after another. No work was to be had, and I could but spend my time at theatres and at the home of my fiancée.

Then, one morning many weeks after my initial meeting with the old doctor, I could stand the strain no longer. The money continued to flow in promptly each Monday and by now I was almost a raving maniac. I grasped my hat and called the first taxi in sight, an old and dilapidated, rickety affair.

"Soulé Foundries, Twenty-Second and Army Streets!" I snapped at the grizzled old driver.

I must see what in hell is going to happen there. And who could blame me? It was all as inevitable as night. I must needs either see why that old fool had cautioned me to stay away from the place or go stark mad!

I climbed out of the car and paid my fare, my very knees shaking and entered the great portals. The deafening din of the tumultuous machinery caused me to hesitate in awe. I had once worked here for the measly sum of four dollars a day, my mind entirely at ease. But now—it was as if I entered the very furnaces of the devil himself! I bolstered up enough courage to continue on into the very bowels of the foundry. No one stopped me—the men were too busy at work and I peered lustily through the gloom of the smelter, the acrid fumes of the metal biting at my nostrils.

I strode past a dozen furnaces, intent upon visiting the very runway where I had seen myself standing. And I did reach my objective in safety, the cranes roaring above, their hooks holding massive, bulbous cauldrons of seething metal.

I watched, breathlessly, my abdomen tingling, as four tubs of white-hot metal were rushed past me, directly overhead. Not a thing happened! *Not a thing!* I was elated, for it meant that the *Augur* was wrong, after all. I would walk from the foundry exactly as I had en—

Then it *did* happen! There was a savage shout from the crane-man above. I veered to the right and a great, white column of pouring metal fell from the unbalanced bucket—not one foot from me—directly into the midst of a group of workers below! The column of metal did not strike me, but the following container—the white-hot bucket—struck me a glancing blow upon the shoulder, dislocating it and setting my clothes afire!

From then on, all was a bedlam, and I recall nothing other than a rending, tearing demon striking the run-way and hurtling into the midst of a gang of shrieking Mexicans working the drafts at furnace No. 7. I found later, that the bucket had disengaged itself from the crane-hook, its rounded bottom striking my shoulder. Had I been a matter of mere inches further to the left, I would doubtless have been crushed and charred. Even as it was, that catch of fate had taken the toll of three lives.

Coincidence? No! Impossible! *Incredible!*

And always, during the weeks after—that accursed, dastardly, hundred dollars! It mocked me. It made me arise from my cot at the hospital and curse and yell and shriek! But always, during the ensuing weeks, as plaster after plaster was pasted to my charred side and as shot after shot of cocaine was given to me to deaden the pain, the nurse continually brought that mocking white envelope and put it beneath my pillow, unopened with the others.

And then, one day when I began to understand things, I awoke to find the Doctor himself sitting at the foot of my bed. His face was as pale as the bed-cloth and his eyes bloodshot and ugly.

"I'm going to try and undo what I have done," he said hoarsely. I judged distances and chances and finally gave up the idea of trying to choke him—plenty of time remained for that. I remained silent as he continued.

"Listen, the *Augur* has proved that it does not lie. I cautioned you not to go near the foundries and you see what has happened. Now, I'll give you one final opportunity to beat fate! Do not, under any circumstances, for your own sake, go near the Southern Pacific Depot at Third and Townsend Streets during the next two months. Lock yourself into a cell and throw the key away—restrain yourself under all conditions—*but keep away!* You haven't much more time—I've been listening to your delirium—but—" he shrugged his shoulders and walked out of the room. All of which caused me to think!

Inexorable Fate

ANOTHER fortnight and another. By now, at the hospital, I had accumulated over two thousand dollars.

My fiancée startled me one evening by exclaiming that I looked dreadfully pale—and it was with utmost difficulty that I managed to stutter an excuse which she probably did not swallow at all.

I knew that my physical as well as my mental

self was becoming affected by the ravages of my imagination. I felt sick at heart and body—as if I were sentenced to die at the gallows and awaited my turn in a death-cell.

That Saturday, *two* hundred dollars came to me instead of one! And two days ahead of time! Trembling, a million ghastly hallucinations rending my brain, I made my way to the home of the doctor. It was evening and I found no light whatsoever illuminating the house. Dejected, I faced about in time to see the massive, Cadillac sedan hurtle up the driveway.

"Doctor!" I said hoarsely scarcely awaiting his approach from the garage, "I want you to do something for me before I go mad!" I held myself between the impulse to tear him to shreds and the inclination to flee in horror from the place.

Without a word, he ushered me into the lobby of the home where I immediately collapsed into an upholstered chair, my spirits oozed from me.

"I knew you would be here tonight," he said, "so I made it a point to be here. I believe I have advice that may help you a little."

"Go ahead," I invited half-heartedly.

"Listen," he bent closer so that his reeking breath became a stench—exactly as it had once before. "I have bought a ticket for you on the Travel-Air Express to Los Angeles tonight at twelve. Pack up and go—I will give you a thousand dollars—only, for God's sake—*don't go East!* If you do, it will be death! And remember, keep away from the Southern Pacific Depot!"

I absorbed his directions and advice as if I were drinking wine. It stimulated me.

Then, some minute thought—a momentary inclination—struck me and out of that seed of fire sprang a flame—a conflagration! Already I had cursed myself for falling into the hands of this fool—of this demon! I could do nothing but assume the part I had been asked to play—to sell my life for a few measly dollars! Curse him! A singular elation—not unlike the ecstasy derived from *hasheesh*—seemed to take in my soul. It seemed to suck every remaining bit of humanity from me.

A gleam crept into my eyes and I saw a leering devil, hornless and old, standing before me. I laughed. I let my head fall back and I laughed hoarsely. But I quickly recoiled, my hands at my throat, for I could not allow that *Thing* to kill me. He looked as if he *did* wish to suck the life from me!

But how small! How infernally small he was—why, I could kill him with my bare hands! I could choke him to death with one hand—yet he had me in his power—the dirty—

I felt myself grow warmer under the collar.

"The machine is either loco, you devil, or—" I paused. "What time am I due to kick off tonight!" I snapped and he paled.

"Come on," I growled, "tell me or I'll make hash out of you!"

"All right," he answered. "It is six-twenty now—your time comes at exactly two o'clock Pacific time—Man, you are crazy!"

"Crazy? Am I?" against that surging—that blood-red haze! It was irresistible! "You tell me not to go East, you *devil?* I shrieked now and I arose, towering above him. His hand flew to his hip and drew a huge, black automatic. "You and your damned machine are nuts! To hell with both of you! I'm going to prove to you that you're both as batty as a loon. You aren't human—you're a devil—out of my way there! I'm going to make hash out of your *Augur!*"

I sprang upon him, my entire two hundred pounds! He wheeled and fired, the bullet missing me—and then, it was too late. I had hold of his hand and wrenched the weapon from him. He was a devil again and I treated him as a devil should be treated—*I mangled him!* Six bullets weren't enough! I carried his corpse into the laboratory where I completely annihilated everything in sight, using the very corpse with which to thrash everything out of my sight! (I can't write—I am going mad!)

After piling everything into one mass in the center of the laboratory and applying a match, I ran bellowing from the house and in his car was soon hurtling down Nineteenth Avenue with horn shrieking for the right of way.

Across Lincoln Way and into the Golden Gate Park. Two police took up my trail from the bedlam that I was causing. But I had a hundred-mile-an-hour auto and a wide-open road! At Haight and Masonic, I abandoned the car and leaped into a taxi which soon whisked me toward the lodging house where I lived.

The next hour found me considerably relieved and ready, my grips packed. I lay down to rest, determined not to think of anything. And, exhausted, I fell asleep.

I awoke two hours later, the call of "Extra!" ringing in my mind. Cursing myself for the thousandth time for falling asleep, I hurriedly made my way out and I leaped aboard a cruising taxi.

"Southern Pacific Depot!" I yelled into the ear of the driver as he pressed the accelerator. "Make it in ten minutes and I'll make it ten dollars!"

"Nope!" he said promptly. "But stand all speeding tickets and I'll make it in fifteen!"

"O.K." I said nervously as I lit a cigarette.

"No train going East until twelve-fifteen, sir!" The ticket agent was sure. "But," he said, "There's a plane leaving Mills Field for Salt Lake City in a half-hour. You can make it easily in our pursuit-plane for the small sum of—"

"Sum be damned!" I snapped as I handed him the money. "Get me on that ship in a hurry. It's a matter of life and death!"

"You will leave in ten minutes, sir!"

A call was sent to the field to detain the waiting ship and in exactly one-half hour, I stepped aboard.

* * * *

We saw the morning lights of Reno at 1:15—some minutes ago. I have been writing steadily and as fast as I can with this machine. I have borrowed it from a young stenographer on board with me—and, Gawd, each time I look at her, it reminds me of the girl I left behind!

That is the only reason why I write this account—the fatalist in me that continually tells me that I owe this note to someone. If I reach Salt Lake City alive, I will destroy this. If not,

I wish whoever does find it, to immediately send it to Olga Humbert Collins of 8831 Nineteenth Avenue, San Francisco.

That music is beautiful—and let's see—the time is exactly 1:29 A. M. The radio broadcasters say so. I have exactly thirty-one minutes to live—according to the *Augur!* Ha, ha! I am tempted to laugh aloud!

* * * *

Time has passed—I forgot completely as I reread this manuscript! There! At the stroke of the gong, it will be exactly *two-forty-five* A. M.! There it goes—I was doomed to die at two—I am alive! It is almost three! The *Augur* was wrong! That accident at the foundry was either coincidence or some dastardly plot of that Doctor!

I have been chatting with the co-pilot who has fifteen minutes off duty. Wait—he tells me emphatically that it is two-fifty and dawn is not far off!

But there is something amiss. Something that must aid in the balancing of the darkness about me. There is some fact that I have overlooked! What on Earth can it be? But of course it is all stupidity. All I care for is the fact that I am alive and that the *Augur* has lied! That scientist was crazy! (I wish that co-pilot would look more to his controls! He doesn't look at his instruments at all—he seems to be sleepy!)

Ha—they have San Francisco on the radio now.

"KPO, San Francisco. We will now give you the correct time (I gloat as I listen, for it must be near three o'clock by now!) with the compliments of the Howard-Mohrson Jewelry Store, now at 991 Market Street, the same address since 1871. (I smilingly curse the broadcaster for his foolishness in keeping me in suspense.). At the stroke of the gong—ladies and gentlemen—it will be exactly, let's see, *one fifty-nine Pacific Standard time!*"

The pilot is saying something—but I do not hear—I am not only deaf, but—Gawd! He is explaining something—the roar of the motors is deafening!

"You see," he says, "it is exactly one hour earlier than it is in Mountain Time. This is being broadcast from San Francisco!"

God! One minute to live! If that *Augur*—thirty seconds will tell whether I will live or not—twenty—ten—that pilot—the fool—why does he not look at his instr—

* * * *

And this concludes the manuscript that I have found amidst the wreckage of the *Falcon*. That name of "Olga Humbert Collins" has proved fictitious. There is no such person on Nineteenth Avenue. I cannot fathom it at all. *How on Earth could that man have known without the aid of a real Augur that the Falcon was to crash at exactly that moment?*

I have found that a home such as that mentioned *has* burned to the ground on Nineteenth Avenue! But it is all a puzzle—it contradicts itself in a dozen and one places, I admit—but I have here material proof that in all probabilities, an *Augur* did exist. I can get absolutely no information from the San Francisco, *Examiner*. I am willing to submit this manuscript to anyone laying claim to it—it is not mine. "O. H. Collins", get in touch with me please.

THE END

• • • FOR THE AUGUST ISSUE • • •

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And others in the
AUGUST 1931 WONDER STORIES
ON ALL NEWSSTANDS JULY 1

"The Man From Mars"

By **P. Schuyler Miller**

In a streak of blue flame, one of the spheres flew to meet him, burst in his face with a dazzling glare of white light, blinding him.

"The Man From Mars"

by the Author of
"Dust of Destruction"
"The Red Plague"

SURELY a circus is no sane place to look for a Martian—particularly a little one-elephant show like "Professor Von Tempski's Mammoth Museum of Art, Wonder, and Talent." And yet, there it was—blazened in huge crimson letters on a field of sulfurous yellow, "THE MAN FROM MARS (fifty cents)." Having a normal curiosity, I stopped for a second look. A Martian has the reputation of being rather a *rara avis*, at least in Kansas.

The show was staked out on the fair grounds just south of the city line—one battered show-tent, a small menagerie, a double line of weather-worn wagons and side-shows, and, wonder of wonders, the palace of "THE MAN FROM MARS". I, for one, had never seen its like in a circus of this or any other size. For one thing, it smacked of imagination of a high order.

It was more permanent than the other side-shows on the lane, as well as bigger—built with reasonable stability on a sort of wheeled floor or chassis — literally palatial when compared to its tawdry neighbors. The style was modernistic — futuristic even—and colorful as such an attraction must needs be, but colored with something like taste and sanity in soft, well-blended tones that gave an effect like nothing earthly that I knew of.

Above the door hung a painting of Mars—remarkably done from the scientific angle — with the grey-green of the Syrtis Major thrusting down into the rose and salmon of the great disk, and a southern ice-cap gleaming wanly at the top. Over its entire face ran a fine tracery of lines—"Schiaparelli's "canali", Lowell's "canals"—more than I had seen on any published sketch. Drawn by its incongruity, I stepped closer, then was brought rudely back to reality by the hoarse yawp of the barker.

"Absolutely the most stoopenjus spectakle known to mankind! Unequaled by the wizzudry of modern science! Ladies an' gennlemun—*a living, breathing, speaking man from the planet Mars!* A castaway from another world! The exiled prince of another race—lost in the endless sea of empty space—drawn by mysterious forces to our own little world, an' persuaded to entertain the intelligent citizens of this great state an' nation with examples of the life an' wonders of another world! Ladies an' gennlemun, it is a priv'lige none should miss—the spectakle of this century—unequaled in the hist'ry of this mighty Universe, an', ladies an' gennlemun, all for the little fee of fifty cents, four bits, one half of a dollah! Come one, come all! This reemarkubble spectakle commences in the short time of ten minutes! Only ten short minutes before this great pufformance, ladies an' gennlemun, an' remembah—only fifty cents, one half of a dollah! Right this way for the stoopenjus pufformance!"

Behind the barker's stand and the ticket box was a great canvas drop, inscribed with a series of names "renowned to the world of science" as the blurb ran—endorsing the magnificence and scientific worth of the man from Mars. Most of them were literally peppered with degrees, at least fifty percent unknown to earthly education. They may have been from Martian universities. Not a few I had noticed adorning the back pages of cheap magazines—advertising quack cures, love philtres, and the like. But down in the lower corner, seeming to cringe beneath the mass of "wisdom" above it, was a name that brought me to with a rude jolt—Harvey Henderson, B.S. I slammed down my four bits, grabbed the ticket, and shouldered through the gaping crowd of farmers into the tent.

There were few there—a dozen or so of the more serious and the more foolish—and I was able to look about me freely. The interior of the place in no way belied the promise of the outside.

P. SCHUYLER MILLER

IN Clark Ashton Smith's story "The Amazing Planet" which appears in this issue, we get an intensely realistic picture of the bewilderment of earthmen in trying to understand the complex civilization of an alien world.

The present story, offers the opposite viewpoint—that of a creature from Mars attempting to probe our earth civilization and the motives of its inhabitants. There is no doubt but that in the elusive, intelligent sympathetic Martian, Mr. Miller has created a character that actually lives in our minds.

We seem to feel, and understand the background of thoughts and ideas of this strange creature, and through his splendid picture, Mr. Miller virtually recreates the mysterious world that the Martian must have inhabited. We commend this story to our readers as an example of the very highest type of science fiction.

Here too the decoration was colorful but quiet, ornate but sane, and here the touch of scientific authority was even more evident.

There were a number of remarkable paintings of the planets, including our own, transparencies of queer, monstrous machines, lit dimly from behind, inscriptions in an unknown script—and everywhere the play of tint and raw color, shaded and blended, that made the place worthy of a gallery of modern art. The tent was oval, and halfway across cut a thick curtain, before which the rough plank seats were placed. The crowd was still filing in and gaping wisely at the decorations, and I was able to secure a fairly smooth seat directly in front of the low stage.

Slowly the place filled, and now there was evidence of stealthy motion behind the curtain. We need not wait long now. Soon someone, something, would step from behind the drape and stand revealed—a man from Mars. The name of Harvey Henderson assured me of that. Inside of minutes, seconds, I would see him—"the spectackle of the century"—the man from Mars.

The lights waned and died. The whispering of the audience sank, ceased. Now a faint music was playing, behind the curtain—soft and full of overtones like the theremins I had heard once—music of the electrons. And softly the curtain parted and drew aside.

A great gilded chair stood on a raised dais in the center of the stage. Above it hung a sphere of blue light, beside it stood a table with queer-shaped glass and metal instruments—cathode tubes, Tesla globes, and the like, many of them unfamiliar to me. And on the throne itself, hunched down in its gilded depths, was the man from Mars.

A sort of keen disappointment ran over me at the sight of him—regret raised, I suppose, by the fantasies of science fiction, by weird tales of ruling monsters. For this Martian was so palpably, so pathetically human. He was so much like what logic predicted and imagination scorned, a Martian of the masses, formed for the common people—a thin body with huge chest, swathed in dull red robes, spindling legs and arms with bony, protruding joints; large, delicate hands and small feet, and a huge head. But for a cursory glance at the general effect, that magnificent head seized everyone's attention. It was half again as large as our own, a smooth pink dome rising above a bulging brow and tiny, wrinkled face. The ears were large and protruding. Face and scalp were hairless, and seemed like the gullying of an eroded dune. A little, full mouth was pursed under a slightly hooked nose, and above, sunk deep beneath massive hairless brows, were his eyes!

Those eyes! I shall never forget that first impression of two prisoned souls—staring from a mummied mask, a face long dead. For the contrast was so enormous as to seize the breath. The general effect was grotesque and ugly, but in those two great eyes was all the beauty of another world—living, vibrant, ageless beauty, with a sort of grave wisdom and penetration that seemed to gaze through and beyond you—beyond the world itself. In that moment I knew that this was beyond all doubt a Martian.

The Stupendous Show

BUT the show had begun, silently, without aid or interference from the barker, who lounged in the rear of the tent, as intent as ourselves upon the performance. Long, tapered fingers danced over a keyboard fixed to the chair-arm, playing a queer mechanical tune of little muffled clickings. From beyond, a low cart ran out, rubber-tired, bearing an instrument that I recognized as a variant of the common theremin. Soft music was drifting from its speaker. Again, and a second cart appeared, with a large plate-glass tank of colorless liquid, water, apparently, for goldfish were swimming about in it.

And now the hands were playing a witch's dance on the ivory keys, leaping faster than the eye could follow, here, there, weaving a pattern of wizardry and wonder. The instruments beside the throne rose as on wings into thin air, swept forward, grouped above the forestage. A pause, and then a group of three high voltage discharge tubes, neon, mercury, and one I do not know, began to blaze with color, leaping, pulsing color, far beyond any earthly art. The thin-stalked bulb of a cathode ray surged to the fore, hung for an instant, then began its weird glow as its hurtling rays ionized the air. A little half-sphere of some dark mineral darted up before the window of the tube, into the path of the rays.

Instantly it blazed with blue flame, vivid, blinding, scintillant with dancing sparks of orange-red—yet those of us who sat, dazzled, within arm's reach of it, felt no heat from it, only the odd plucking sensation that tells of great latent electrical forces stored in the atmosphere. More, the ray died, and the discharge tubes, yet the cold blue flame burned on alone, undiminished, swinging in slow, small circles above our heads, until a scurry of keys bore it from sight.

And now came the great marvel of the entire program. A second tank appeared, with fish, like the first. The Tesla globes swam out, ten inch spheres of brass, poised perhaps ten feet apart, and silent lightning began to play between them, lacework of pale electric flame that danced without the customary crackle of a high-tension spark. And the flame began to sing—soft, weird music like the voice of the theremin. To its low tune, the water of the twin tanks began to rise, draw away from the sides, mount into a rounded cone that slowly elongated until it tore loose from the glass with a little sigh, leaving the fish in perhaps six inches of water at the bottom of the tank. And now the cones or spindles bulked into two spheres of water, floating free above us, swinging slowly about each other to the rhythm of the flame-song. Nearer they swung, and nearer, then met and merged in a single great globe of water, a dozen feet in diameter, drifting unsupported above our upturned faces.

Perhaps the play of color and the low music hypnotized us. Perhaps the giant globe was of thin glass, hung from invisible wires. Perhaps—many things. I tell only what I saw.

The sphere was becoming opaque, milky, and now vague forms and pictures were appearing on

its surface—familiar forms. It was a map of the Earth that hung before us, slowing spinning, colored with the bright glare of polar ice, the blue of seas, the green and rose of forest and desert, dappled with drifting clouds, strung with mountain ranges like pearls across the face of the land—our Earth, seen from outside, from open space!

It faded as it came, and a new world spun in its stead—rose-red, with capping of white and a tracery of fine green lines over its entire face, running from red of desert waste to cool green of vegetation, from southern ice to northern snows, everywhere, curving in great circles across the planet—Mars. Here was no cloud-drift, no blue and sparkle of seas, but another, slower change, speeded by the wizardry of thought—the wax and wane of seasons over the face of the planet.

Slowly the green glow of spring flowed down from the southern pole, advancing along the thin tracery of the "canals", freshening the drab hues of the Syrtis, down to the equator and up once more to the northern pole, then back, and forth again—the flow of water, of life on another world. Then it was gone, and the sphere shone clear.

Visions were coming, deep within it now—time-worn rubble of red rock and red sand speeding through its still depths, giving place to mountainous ramparts of clear blue ice, to long level plains swathed deep with stiff, woolly green moss, to narrow crevices, canyons thrusting into the planet's heart, rimmed with the dense green moss.

And for an instant we gazed into one of these great gashes in the plateau, found it a series of steep, short terraces, stepping down and down into a dim blue murk, with thin crustings of vegetation and crowded files of queer, squat stone huts, flat and angular, with oval openings in the walls. Swiftly we dropped past terrace after terrace, the cliff walls crowding in, the blue haze thickening, until there came a faint glimpse of a widening floor, flanged out from the chasm, and a maze of stone and metal looming from the valley floor—one glimpse, no more, for the walls rushed down, the desert wastes dropped away swiftly beneath us, and Mars swam alone, dwindling in black space—Mars, then the silver of Earth, then darkness. The curtain fell, the lights came up, and we filed in hushed wonder toward the door.

As I turned, outside, to leave, a hand fell on my shoulder, the husky voice of the barker was in my ear.

"Hey, he wants to see you, inside—the guy that runs it. Go back here, longside of the six-legged calf. He'll be waitin'. An' say, talk it up a little, will ya? We ain't too prosperous."

Wondering, I went back—alongside of the six-legged calf—to a flap in the rear of the tent, pushed it open. I was back-stage, the throne and all the rest of the paraphernalia before me, the form of the Martian slumped wearily in the scant comfort of its gilded seat. A man—a human—was bending over him. At the tinkle of the bell on the tent-flap, he swung around, advanced to meet me, a grin broadening on his features—Harvey Henderson!

"Well, you old dingbat, how'd you like the show?" he chuckled. "Quite some elaborate hocus-pocus, not?"

"Man, Harvey, it's big!" I gasped. "It's bigger than anything I ever even dreamed of. No wonder they can charge fifty cents and get away with it!"

"Yes, it's a great show, all right. But I wish I'd never seen it—or him. It can't last, Hank, and I'm afraid the breakup will come pretty soon. He's getting sick of it all, and I'm not the one to blame him!"

"He—? Oh, you mean the Martian—the man from Mars."

"YES, the man from Mars. Funny that he should run into this, after all he had learned to expect—funny, and kind of pitiful, too. I just wanted to see you again, Hank—let you know I was here. There's one more show before the big ruckus outside. I'll see you after, unless you'd rather gape at old Minnie, our solo pachyderm, and our sick camel." He sighed.

"There isn't so much difference, to them, between a moth-eaten camel or a toothless lion and—him. And he feels it, a lot stronger than I do. It can't last. But there's no time for that now—see you while the big affair is on. Tell Steve—he's the barker—that I said so."

So I went, to come back after the big show had drained the crowd from the lane of side-shows, and the parade was forming beyond the mess-tent. The Martian still crouched in his great throne, but now all the apparatus of the side-show was drawn aside, and the throne turned with its back to the closed curtain, facing a lighted oil stove with something simmering in a saucepan on top. Harvey was scattering crumbs for the fish in the twin tanks.

"Ah, there you are," he said, strained relief in his voice. "I was afraid you had skipped out on me, and I'm due to need help before the day is out. After the show tonight—well, anything can happen. He is fed up."

"But what have you been doing since I saw you last? And where did—he—come from—how did he ever get here, of all places?"

"I'll tell you, all in good time. But right now you had better meet him—he has had you on his mind since you came in after the show. I guess he senses a kindred spirit."

Harvey turned and looked deep into the great eyes that had been staring at us. His lips moved, ever so slightly, as they used to when he put forth great mental effort. As in reply, the form on the throne stiffened, lunged forward and rose to its feet, moved toward me, laboredly. The eyes caught mine, held them, seemed to swim into my very being and search my inner self, questing for some thought or emotion vital to him who was their master. A delicate hand took mine—rough and dry, lifeless, like a mummy's. At this close range, his face was of the same coarse texture, unlike any flesh that I had ever seen. The Martian sensed my thoughts, for something like a twinkle appeared in his eyes—something kindly and appreciative of humor. Harvey sensed it too, and chuckled at my bewilderment.

"I have a shock for you, Hank," he said. "Try to bear up, old man. I hate to disillusion you."

He fumbled at the nape of the Martian's neck, pressed sharply. There was a little metallic click, a faint whir, and the Martian's body collapsed slowly, like a deflated balloon, into a crumpled heap of red cloth and wire-framed pseudo-flesh. Only his head remained, suspended in midair, with a three foot cylinder of faintly violet opaque crystal dangling beneath it. Another click, and the great cranium split, just behind the ears. Harvey laid the halves carefully aside and stood back. The Martian—the real "man from Mars"—floated before me, watching me.

A squat three-foot cylinder of violet crystal, just over two feet in diameter, rose unbroken to a transparent hemisphere of glass or quartz, like the lens of a flashlight. It housed the head of the Martian—a head much like the mock skull that had hidden it. There was the small, pursed mouth and fine nose, the bald, broad brow and vault, the great eyes—but the protruding ears were gone, and the seamed skin of face and forehead.

Everything was smooth, smooth and very pale and white, almost bleached in appearance, while the ears seemed to be replaced by a shallow cup in the side of the head. Above and about the Martian's head, inside the crystal globe, was suspended a network of very fine silver filaments, with cables like spider-web running down into the hidden interior of the purple cylinder. For a moment we stared at each other, then Harvey broke the silence.

"He can't make sounds in our audible range," he told me, "but he has a power, telepathy of some sort, by which to express himself. It is a crude method, at best, with us, but I am getting able to identify a few of the more abstract mental impressions—less of the picture-thinking necessary. That sort of thing fags him terribly—like finger-language to me, I suppose—and what it does to me is a caution! But I *can* talk back at just him a little, when he strains to get me. It's plenty tough work. I'm afraid you won't be carrying on much of a conversation with him, Hank. I'll have to do for both of us. I've had plenty of practice in the last five years."

"Five years?" I wondered. "Wasn't it pretty close to five years ago that I saw you last, at the alumni banquet? Then you just dropped out of things entirely, all at once. I guess you're still listed among the missing in the directory. What happened to you?"

"He happened," Harvey replied with a smile. "It was just a week after that dinner that he landed, as I reckon it, and two days later I came across him. Since then—well, we've had plenty to do. Time went by pretty fast. I'll tell you about it all.

"You see, he landed in some sort of a space-ship—I haven't figured just what, yet—and when he was out on an exploring trip he ran across a farmer who promptly locked him up in the silo as a menace to the natural world of Genesis.

"That's where I came in. You know I was selling crop insurance, and I wanted a look at this fellow's silo before I'd say anything definite. I saw the Martian, heard what the farmer knew about him, and my curiosity took a big jump. He had sort of attached himself to me, too—felt that he stood a better chance of establishing communication, I guess—and it wasn't long before he did get his first message across.

"I was sitting in the barn door, with him beside me, when all at once my Eversharp hopped out of my pocket and began to scurry over a piece of new pine flooring. It drew a picture—a map of the Earth—then hovered over it sort of questioning me. I knew what was causing the thing—I'd seen him move a pitchfork once—and I caught the idea. I sketched North America, then the United States in large scale, and put a cross on the place where we were.

"That was just the start. Pretty soon I caught the telepathy idea—it takes two to make it work—and it wasn't long before I had the story roughly pieced out. Whereupon I threw up my insurance job and hired out as general valet and watchdog to the Martian.

"He wasn't the first to come, though we have never found any of the others. All went well until he hit the Heaviside layer, then he lost control and fell. His car is deep in some sidehill in west Kansas, if nobody has dug it up, and we're going to find it.

The Trick!

"THAT'S about all there is to tell. The farmer hit on the idea of selling him to the circus, and I came along as the only one who could talk to him. Between us we set up this show, and it has been making a good bit of cash for the circus, but they're not satisfied. They've seen what his electro-magnetic control of space curvature can do in the way of moving things, and they want to have him hoist the elephant in the main show, or something of the sort. It won't be long before they fire the roustabouts and have him doing all the heavy work around here! They don't seem to realize what a mental strain it is on him to do all that levitation and what-not! They treat him worse than a truck-horse! We fixed up this mechanical man to fit around him and give him more sex-appeal, or something, as per the management's orders, and as a result I've had to fake some of the things he could do straight, without the insulation, but there can be too much of anything! We don't stand for much more!"

"But what can you do?" I wanted to know.

"That's where you come in, Hank. Between us, we'll get him out, and somehow find that space-car of his, then—au revoir. I'm not afraid that there will be any general invasion if he gets home safely. He realizes that he has picked poor specimens of humanity for a general sample, but he's none too enthusiastic about bringing down his wife and kids and settling here permanently, which I guess was the idea in the first place.

"Last year we fixed up a new suit for him and saw some of the bigger cities that we passed near, and from what I know and can guess, he will stick pretty close to Mars when he gets back, and what's more, he'll sort of encourage that sort of thing as a general practice. It's too bad, too, for we are pretty good friends. Well, Hank, how

about it? Do we swindle old Prof. Von Tempski out of his man from Mars?"

"We do that!" I answered without hesitation. "I have a car outside, too. It may come in handy. And believe me, if a man like this Martian has been treated as you say, we owe him whatever we can do to help him out! Humanity must seem to be pretty small potatoes as far as he is concerned, and it's up to us to change his mind if we can, and prove that men here aren't all boors and savages! From the point of view of relative progress, I guess we're just that, but we needn't run clear back to the beasts! Sure I'm with you!"

The light in the Martian's eyes told me that he understood. I felt that whether we succeeded or not, his opinion of mankind in general had been raised a bit, and that he would be content with our efforts.

Matters came to a head directly. Indeed, it seemed almost as if my coming had been the signal for trouble. As I came down past the six-legged calf, just before the evening performance, I nearly rammed head-on into a big, beefy German whom I recognized by his mustaches as Von Tempski, the owner of the show. He jerked past me and stamped off toward the big top, lashing the air furiously with his ring-master's whip. I knew at once that something was brewing, and Harvey's first words were no surprise.

"It's happened, Hank!" he growled. "We've simply got to get him clear tonight or chalk up a total failure. Von Tempski was in here a moment ago, and he's going to go the limit!"

"I know. I saw him. But what can he do against the Martian?"

"More than you'd think, Hank," Harvey answered bitterly. "I'll tell you the whole thing and you can judge for yourself. He wants the Martian to wind up the big show tonight—juggle most of the menagerie, or something of the sort. I told him it wouldn't go—that it was entirely a matter of mental control of enormous forces locked up in that crystal cylinder, and that no mind can heft an entire circus and not break. I tried to show him what would happen if that force should get out of control, there is that crowded tent! I told him it would be sheer slaughter!

"But he's pig-headed—thick! *He* has insurance! *He* can take a chance! Sure, *he* can—but how about us? How about the Martian? Hank, we've *got* to get going, now. I said we needed time to rest, and that he musn't come near us until just before our call to go on. We have till then. We've got to hurry!"

"Right you are, Harvey," I told him. "I'll bring the car up back of the tent, and you can slip out." I opened the flaps, stopped. "Come here quick," I whispered. "And keep quiet."

He poked his head through the flaps beside me. All the flood-lights were on, making the grounds as bright as day. Lined up before the tent were three husky teamsters, with them a dapper, fish-faced individual who was puffing on a big cigar. He had some electrical apparatus set upon soap-boxes—a Wimshurst static machine and a dozen big condensers. I turned my head. Behind the tent were two more of the bruisers and another string of condensers.

Harvey was muttering in my ear. "That's Dugan, the manager. It was his idea in the first place. He doesn't like me, or I him! Look at what he has there—a static machine! Damn him, he has us tied! Even the smallest electric field knots the Martian all up—paralyses his control completely. He'll be helpless, I tell you! And what can we two do against those five bruisers from the tent gang? He's licked us without half trying, Hank!"

His voice was rising, almost to a hoarse scream, and I saw Dugan and the teamsters turn and stare in our direction. Dugan laid down his cigar on the edge of a box and began to spin the handle of the Wimshurst machine, building up his field. He jockied the contacts and a fat blue spark crackled between them. I felt Harvey wince. Then something hard and cold shoved past us—the Martian. He hung just inside the shadow of the calf-tent, staring inscrutably at the four figures in front. For a moment he floated there, then whirled, took in the situation in our rear, and shoved past us again into the tent. We turned to watch him.

The Martian was darting here and there among his apparatus, evidently with some definite project in mind. Harvey knew what it was, too, for he gave a little yelp of glee and ran forward to help the Martian, who spun around to face him. There were a few brief seconds of that uncanny mental conversation, then Harvey came running back.

"We're all O.K.," he burst out. "Just keep an eye open out there and we'll be right with you. Sabe?"

"Right!" I replied, stepping outside.

DUGAN and his men were still there, between us and the car. Dugan was looking at his watch. There was little time to waste—the big show was very nearly over. Inside there were stifled thuds and little metallic clickings, then the flaps opened and Harvey stuck his head through.

"Listen," he whispered, "we've got to fox 'em. No question—just you do what I tell you and it'll all work out later. You go right on out to the car, now, and when I whistle give her all she's got along the south road. Get me? Don't worry now about where you're going—here's a map, but don't look at it until you're well clear of town. Now get going!"

I strode down the narrow aisle between the two tents. The four men saw me coming, tensed for trouble. Dugan stepped forward and blocked my path.

"Just a minute, young fella!" he growled. "Where you goin', an' when? Ain't you goin' to stick around for the grand finale tonight?"

"I am not!" I answered. "No show for me. Henderson is trying to get the Martian all set, but I've got another date. See you again."

The teamsters had closed in, but at a shrug from Dugan they drew aside, and I walked slowly over to the car, started it, then sat back monkeying with the spark lever. All the time I kept a weather eye on the tent and what was happening there. First Harvey stepped out, started toward us, then bent to tie a shoelace. A second form burst from the flaps and streaked back toward the two men in the rear—the artificial, man-

like husk of the Martian. Even in the shadow of the alley I could see that legs and arms dangled limply, and guessed the plan of action. Almost at once, facts bore me out.

Dugan yelled something at his guards in the rear, then tore forward himself. The thin, big-headed body of the seeming Martian sped straight on, and over the row of condensers, regardless of the barring electric field. Dugan sensed something off color, stopped short, then leapt forward again with a curse as Harvey followed the Martian.

Now came the climax of the whole plan. Out of the public entrance to the tent flashed a squat cylinder of glowing purple crystal, six little globes of vivid blue fire circling it like tiny satellites. The teamsters stood aghast, staring open-mouthed. They had never seen the real Martian. But Dugan had, and with the whoop of a maddened Comanche he came fearing down the narrow alley, bellowing unintelligible orders at his men. In a little streak of blue flame one of the spheres flew to meet him, burst in his face with a dazzling glare of white light, blinding him. With an agonized yell he staggered forward, tripped over one of the guy-ropes of the calf-tent, and lay groveling, rubbing his seared eyes with his fists and whimpering like a scared pup.

I turned my face away just in time. The white flame blazed, three times, then again with double force. I looked around again. Dugan and his bruisers were writhing about like so many decapitated hens, bellowing in sheer panic. The Wimshurst machine was a twisted wreck beside shattered condensers, and the squat form of the Martian was speeding toward my car, its halo of blue moons gone.

As he popped into the car beside me, Harvey's shrill whistle split the air beyond the tents and the clamor of a starting Ford followed. I spun about, "on a dime," as the saying goes, and tore down the lane of side-shows toward the south gate at thirty an hour, steadily picking up speed. I could hear Harvey going north in his old bus, and as I passed the big tent I noticed that Von Tempski and two ring-hands were running toward the entrance. Evidently we would be chased.

But Harvey had cared for that. The half-dozen hands, including old Von Tempski, who poured out into the lane of side-shows, saw his old Ford, with the form of the Martian stiff beside him, careen through the gate and burn up the road to the north. Perhaps, if Dugan's bellowing had made coherent English, they might not have fallen into the trap, but they bit, hard, and we had no pursuers. The way the car was running, I could have stood a few.

Aside from making sure that he was safely beside me, I took little or no notice of the Martian. I could not speak his mental lingo, could not share any emotions he may have had, and as far as I was concerned he was just so much dead weight on the springs. Once out of town, I took a look at the map that Harvey had given me—a road-map, with an arrow pointing to a filling station about thirty miles to the south and west. Evidently the farmer who had so fortunately acquired the Martian had become one of the many —a "tourists welcome, free crank-case service". It was certainly going to make the place a lot easier to find.

The Martian in Control

NOW I must explain what happened that night, in a semi-technical manner. In the first place, since it was a circus day, a thunderstorm was coming up, and the overcast sky was already showing flickers of distant lightning. It didn't bother me in the least—in fact, I rather relished a wild ride along unknown, darkened roads, to the accompaniment of heavenly fire and the shattering drum of thunder. No, I was not at all bothered, but to the Martian it must have been sheer hell!

Any sort of electrical disturbance within fairly close range raised merry Cain with his nervous system. I gather that there are few electrical storms on Mars. The Wimshurst machine had him stopped, and even the disturbance from the engine must have given him his bad moments, but now the atmosphere was supercharged with electricity and pouring it into him with every passing second. He must have been utterly paralyzed before half the ride was over. Harvey told me later that it was the apparatus inside his crystalline shell that made him function as such a perfect lightning-rod. After experiencing one severe discharge during a bad storm, Harvey got in the habit of grounding him as effectively as possible whenever a storm even threatened. Of course, I didn't know that.

Anyway, here was the Martian draining high-tension juice from the air—there was plenty of it to spare, for we passed right through the heart of the storm—and storing it up in himself and the car. I never before realized the insulating power of automobile tires. We rode pretty high, and the roads were smooth for the most part, so we didn't discharge to the earth—not for quite a while. And the potential difference between us and the air was much too low for any considerable leakage. The storm itself was of short duration, and the moon was beginning to show itself as I turned into the last lap of our trip—five miles, a railroad crossing, five miles more, and we were there.

We were doing a good fifty on the up-grade to the crossing. It was not a new or smooth one, and we hit it with a tremendous jolt that clashed the rear springs and brought the back end of the car within about five inches of the rails. Five inches was plenty!

It must all have happened in a split second, but I sensed every bit of it! First came a brilliant glare of blue electric fire and a crackling discharge! It was followed by a dull boom as the gas tank went up! Thirdly, the Martian beside me began to blaze with a dazzling white radiance that mounted and mounted in brilliance to a blinding peak, then went out in a smash of shattering glass! The car took the ditch like a greyhound, nosed into the silt and soft, wet clay of the bank, telescoped, and the Martian and I went on through the windshield! I hit in the mud—messy but safe. He landed with a crash that shattered his cylinder and left him fully exposed to the unfamiliar, unfriendly conditions of the minor planet, Earth. There was a sudden flare

as the car began to burn, a second blaze of assorted, gyrating stars, and then the deepest, softest blackness imaginable.

I don't know what eventually brought me to. The car had practically burned out, only its warped and crumpled skeleton left with a few dull ashes beneath. It must have burned fiercely, for my face was blistered where I lay, some twenty feet from it. The sky was clear, and against its pale glow was silhouetted the slowly swinging form of the crossing bell, tolling out its monotonous warning. At the same moment I saw the lights of an approaching car, burning up the wet pavement toward us. This brought me to my feet with a start, and I stood swaying dizzily. Had Von Tempski finally found our trail? Were we to be caught at last?

I never have known. Down the track sounded the warning whistle of the train and the car stopped with a screech of brakes and tires as bars dropped across the road and the train, a long freight, began its interminable crossing.

There was no time to lose—we must escape, and soon! But where was the Martian? The moon answered me, throwing up an iridescent gleam from a chaos of shattered crystal. Just beyond me he lay, on the moss of the ditch-bottom, his crystalline shelter broken. For a moment I stood aghast at the change! For the Martian was entirely different from the domed cylinder that I had come to know! I had realized that it was but a covering, a protective shield against the alien conditions of Earth, but the reality of the creature within staggered me!

There was the same hairless head and blanched face, without the silver filaments and quartz dome, but beneath began a creature beyond my wildest imagination. The head was human, but in the body was no taint of humanity. Directly beneath began a long, tapering cone of dead-white flesh, neckless, with a spatulate lower end like the body of some sea-slug. And to add to the weird effect, from just beneath the tiny chin sprang a tangle of fine grey filaments, like little ashen tendrils, writhing feebly.

He was not yet dead! The moving tentacles and the agonized pleading of his great eyes told me that. The pressing atmosphere of Earth must be sheer torture to his unprotected body. And now, down the track, came the lights and clatter of the caboose. The crossing gates began to rise. The warning bell stopped. We had only seconds to spare! Bending, I scooped up the limp body of the Martian and ducked into the woods beyond the embankment, just as the car bumped over the crossing, stopped beside the wreck, and three or four men leaped from it.

I ran blindly through the woods for perhaps five minutes. At the edge of a cornfield I stopped for breath and to listen for pursuit. The moon was high, and by its dim light I looked down at the creature I held in my arms. It was surprisingly warm—warmer than we, for that matter—for all its slug-like shape. All over the smooth flesh were long scratches from the broken crystal and the tearing undergrowth, and the blood that oozed from them was as red as my own. Above all, its head was human—*it* was human! Those great eyes were pleading with me again, trying vainly to beat through my dullness, to speak!

I could all but sense the agonized thoughts that battered at the portals of my brain. He wanted to tell me something, something vital! I felt a tugging at my arm, something thin and warm twining about it—the tiny grey tentacles of the Martian. They were trying to pull his body higher, toward my shoulder, where a sizable gash had opened. For a moment I stood puzzled, then in an instant, like a flood from the innermost recesses of my brain, the truth swept through me, and I raised him in my arms.

THOSE grey filaments were nerve fibers. Eagerly they played over the gash in my arm, probed it, dug into the exposed flesh. There was a moment of burning pain when I nearly dropped him, as nerve met ruptured nerve and made contact. Then the pain vanished, and new messages were leaping through my brain, the thoughts of the Martian, poured into me through the connected nerves of my arm. They were vague and incoherent, for I had not Harvey's skill and practice in interpretation and the Martian could not waste time in sheer picture language. None the less, I received pictures, sensations, even emotions surging through my faltering brain, and I knew that they likewise surged in that little human head and three-foot slab of flabby flesh.

I sensed the breaking of the crystal cylinder, felt the instant rush of the atmosphere piling pound upon pound of pressure upon the weak form, and the rough soil of the ditch gouging the tender flesh. I received the varied sensations of our flight, the lashing boughs and chill wind, but there was more—a calling of some sort that I could not quite comprehend. One thing was clear enough. He wanted to leave here—to go somewhere and go fast. And I guessed that he meant the farm that had been our destination.

I turned back toward the road. Instantly came a flood of negation—protest—and I stopped. Not there, then, but—where? I suppose my unspoken questioning passed over the grey network to the Martian's brain, for at once there came a sleepiness, a sort of creeping numbness over my whole body, and I felt my limbs crumpling up. As before, the truth found me, and I let myself go limp. But my arms did not unclasp, my knees did not collapse. Without hesitation my body turned and stalked off through the corn. The Martian had taken over control!

That last stage of our strange journey was the most uncanny of all experiences. I had none of the sensations of walking, of holding the dead weight of the Martian, of the obstructions that met our course. I, the detached, mental I, was utterly apart from the thing that had been my body. I floated through empty air, borne aloft by an automaton, a robot, or by the Martian.

Fatigue is largely mental, and the brain that ruled every sensation and motion of my body was the brain of the man from Mars. Beneath my isolated head, the body of an alien creature, spurred by a mind not of Earth, was performing feats of strength and agility that were beyond the utmost daring of the me of an hour ago. Madly we raced through meadows and pastures, hurdled fences in full flight, plunged to our necks

in bogs and streams and smashed blindly through the underbrush of second-growth woodlots—straight across the open countryside in a break-neck, bee-line race to an unknown goal.

My arms did not tire under the Martian's weight, nor did I feel the twigs that lashed us, except when they whipped across my face. To all intents and purposes I was dead, possessed, from the neck down, and the rest of me rode the wind. Yet brain and mind were alive, observing this insane cross-country dash, and by all the gods, *they were enjoying it!* Perhaps, had I thought of the time to come, when I must regain control of my will and my sensations, I would not have been quite so gleeful, but the thrill was beyond all tempering of reason. We flung at a never-changing pace across farm after farm, and I defy any man to produce a sensation to equal it!

At last we burst out of a swamp, raced across a hayfield, took a low fence, and arrived at what looked to me like a small hill of raw earth. In my new objective role, I watched my erstwhile hands strap the Martian to my back with my best suspenders, then plunge into the earth of the hillside and begin scrabbling and tearing away at it like a dog on the trail of a mole. Apparently there was something in that hill that we—I—wanted, and that in a hurry. Idly, I watched me, eagerly awaiting the results of my hands' wild burrowing, the head of the Martian staring as eagerly across my shoulder.

The layer of soil was thin, four feet or less in depth, and beneath lay a great hulk of some flame-scarred, pitted metal. Now I knew. This was the space-ship of the Martian, left hidden at some distance from the farm where Harvey had come upon him. Instead of following the leisurely windings of the road, we had come straight across the face of Kansas to this mound of new earth, beneath which something was calling, calling through miles of space to the Martian. At the circus, the distance had been too great to hear it, but as we drew nearer through the night the voice of that which lay hidden there rang stronger, grew until it rang through and through the brain of this man from the planet Mars and summoned him, and me, to it.

THE earth had hidden a narrow port in the side of the ship. As the last weed-grown clod fell away, I was whirling its grips with a sure knowledge of its mechanism, unscrewing it, casting it aside. I clambered into the gap, bending low, crawled on hands and knees through utter darkness, to a second, sliding valve that closed behind us, and on into an open space where I could stand erect and fumble low on the wall for a stud or switch of some sort, then turn it. A glare of light sprang into being. We were within the Martian space-ship!

Try as I will, I can never visualize any of the details of the welter of apparatus that surrounded me. Perhaps a seal of silence was set upon my memory before the Martian quit me. I have only the impression of the interior of a great enameled globe, its interior a mass of silent machinery—great bus-bars running to ray tubes beyond my wildest dream of size, dial after dial and key-board on key-board, mighty engines of propulsion and destruction, and in the center a round screen of ground glass set about with studs and levers—some sort of a control panel. But against the far wall rested a huge tank of bluish crystal, half full of a milky liquid. My body darted to it, my hands threw off hermetic seals with frantic haste, and over my shoulder the Martian craned anxiously.

Floating half-submerged in the liquid, its tiny lips blue, its eyes closed, lay a miniature replica of the man from Mars! My hands lifted it gently to the face beside my own, then bore it swiftly and surely across the sphere to another cabinet, bathed in the roseate light of twin tubes, laid it there on a cushion of some soft blue fabric, and began the expert manipulation of the finely graduated dials set above the machine, regulating warmth, oxygen, moisture. For minutes, long minutes, our two heads stared down at the little form, lying so still and white against the blue cushion. Then its tiny filaments began to stir, flickering over its cold deathly white body, its lips flushed crimson once more and its eyes opened, looked wonderingly about it, fell on us.

For a moment they examined us with a wisdom ill befitting a baby of any breed or planet, faltered, returned. A faint appeal began to swim in them. In response, my hands played again over the dials. Mechanical fingers appeared from the side of the cabinet, proffered a capsule of some colorless liquid, which the infant swallowed. Evidently it was not yet old enough for the coarser diet of the adult Martian. Again it observed us wisely, then its eyes closed and it slept.

We were across the room now, examining the tank. The milky stuff was draining away, exposing a net of fine wires strung all along the sides of the tank. The Martian studied them from over my shoulder, tugged at them here and there with my hands, let a few of its grey filaments play over them. Then he examined the instrument-board beside the tank, minutely, testing every dial and key with exploring, penetrating filaments.

I began to understand, now. This was an incubator of some sort, set to control and delay the strangely artificial "birth" of the infant Martian at such a time as Earth should be ready to receive it. Its delicate apparatus had failed to function correctly, had developed and nearly killed the baby Martian before its mental cries brought aid from afar. My musings were interrupted rudely as my hands ripped a valve from the piping, hurled it to the metal floor with an angry clang, while my feet mashed it to a tangle of metal and fabric. Evidently Martians have tempers as well as men of Earth.

Now we were opening a sort of closet in the wall, taking out one of the crystal cylinders such as the Martian had worn before. My hands lifted him from my back, lowered him carefully into the wire-lined tube, his head and a few thin filaments alone protruding from the top. One by one the grey threads withdrew. Little by little there swept over me an anguish of tortured mind and body such as I never want to know again. The last fine neural filament slipped into the tube, and as the full sense of my cruelly lashed body swept over me in one huge wave of knifing agony, I fell back on the floor, senseless.

Martians are human, despite their unearthly bodily form. He cared for me while I lay unconscious from the strain in the body that he had borrowed and so cruelly used. After a few days he ventured near the farm that was to have been our destination, found Harvey there, waiting anxiously for news of us. And as soon as my senses returned, he removed me to the outer world and delivered me to Harvey, a bruised and battered wreck of what I had been, yet strengthening fast under the healing rays and medicines of another race and planet.

For an instant before he reentered the sphere, he hovered over me. The crystal helmet tipped back and two fine nerve-threads flickered forth, sought the yet unhealed gash in my arm. A brief message—a single picture—then the connection was broken, the dome shut, the man from Mars vanished into the darkness of the airlock. Harvey drew me back to the edge of the marsh, where we crouched, waiting.

The port was closed, sealed from within. Now deep within the hill, began a rumbling, a throbbing as of great hidden engines, and of a sudden came a great burst of coruscating golden light, a crash of rushing air, a hail of falling clods, and the Martian space-ship was gone forever.

One thing rests untold. What was it that prompted the Martian to again endure the torturing pressure of Earth's atmosphere for that one moment when the connection was made and a thought, a message, flashed through my brain? What was that message? There is more than one answer.

Harvey was never allowed within the space-ship. His scientific knowledge might have made him dangerous to the peace of mind of Mars. As for me, that one moment of contact wiped all detailed memory of the ship's mechanisms from my brain. Only generalities remain, and with them that last picture that was impressed indelibly upon my memory as the Martian sensed the unconscious, unexpressed puzzlement in my mind. In that brief instant I envisioned an earthly mother, and in her arms a laughing child, and I knew the answer to the riddle that had been stirring my thoughts for many days. *"The Man from Mars" was a woman!*

THE END

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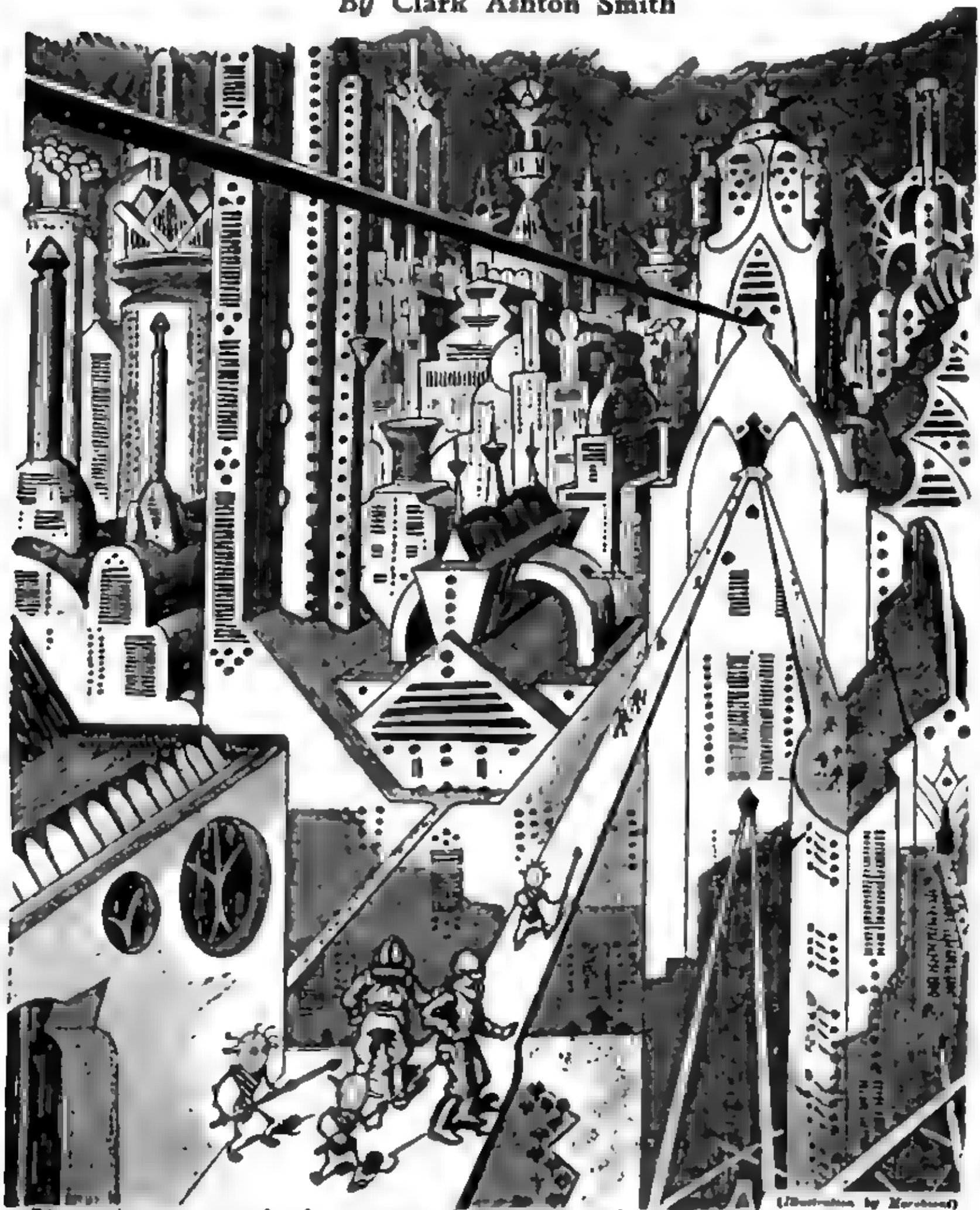
The Amazing Planet

By Clark Ashton Smith



(Illustration by Marchioni)

The earthmen gave an involuntary gasp of amazement and were seized by an instant dizziness. Below at an awful depth were the streets of a monstrous city.

The Amazing Planet

By the Author of
"Marooned in Andromeda"
"An Adventure in Futurity"

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

DUE to some curious twist in human mentality, we believe that if we were to get in touch with an extra-terrestrial civilization who have reached a much higher stage of development than ourselves, we could immediately proceed to exchange thoughts with them.

This is supposed to be accomplished; first, by sign language; second, by talking or written symbols, and third by mental telepathy.

Just why writers assume such easy communication is difficult to understand. The chances are not one in a million that it would be possible for explorers or adventurers to enter into communication with the supposedly higher civilization.

For instance, here on earth we have several extremely high civilizations, such as those of the ant and the bee. Their intelligence and development is unquestioned. Yet we have made no progress at all in communicating with either of these insects.

Why should anything different be the case if explorers landed on a foreign planet, or if explorers from other worlds should visit us? Their mode of living; their thought expressions; their actions, in all probability would be so far removed from our own, that such a thing as intelligent communication between the two races would be almost impossible.

Indeed, as the author of this most absorbing story points out, you could remain for quite a time with the higher civilization and come away from it without knowing at all what it was about, and without having exchanged a single thought.

"THIS world," said Volmar, "plainly is of Mercurian type. One side is always presented to the sun; the other confronts eternal night; though it may be that there is a very slow and incomplete diurnal rotation. One hemisphere, as we have seen, is a blazing desert, and the other is sheeted with ice and frozen snow, except for the twilight zone in which we have landed."

After eight unbroken months of ether-voyaging, in their attempted circuit of the universe, Captain Volmar and his men had felt the need of stretching their legs again on some sort of Terra Firma. The cramped quarters of the ether-ship *Alcyone*, the monotony of a never-ceasing flight through spatial emptiness and darkness, with only far-strewn suns and systems and nebulae for mile-posts, had palled on everyone, even the ascetically ardent Volmar. A brief respite on some planetary body was deemed advisable. They had made a number of such pauses during their half-decade of journeying.

They were nearing a lesser, unnamed sun in Serpens when this decision was made. Of course, the sun might not possess a planetary system. However, as they drew closer, the *Alcyone's* telescopic reflectors revealed four planets that were circling it in wide-flung orbits. It so happened that in the position which it then occupied, the innermost world was nearer to the space-ship than the others; and it soon attracted the curiosity of the voyagers by its odd markings.

Between the deserts of the sunlit hemisphere and the ice-fields and mountains that glimmered palely on the nightward side beneath two diminutive moons, a dark, narrow zone suggesting vegetation was visible—a zone that encircled the planet from pole to pole. Clouds and vapors above this penumbral belt had proved the presence of an atmosphere. A landing had been made; and Captain Volmar, Jasper the mate, Roverton, and the other members of the crew, had emerged cautiously from the flier's man-hole after determining the temperature and chemical constituents of the outside air.

The temperature was moderate—about 60°. But the existence of one or two unknown, uncertain gases in the air had denoted the advisibility of wearing masks and carrying oxygen-tanks. Equipped with these, and armed with automatics, the party sallied forth into a strange landscape.

The *Alcyone* had descended on a low, level, open hill-top. The ground resembled a coarse turf, and was pale-blue in color. When the men trod upon it for the first time, they found that it was not covered with anything in the least related to grass, but with a peculiar growth, two or three inches high, like a thin, branching fungus. It was not rooted in the soil; and it fell over or crumbled readily be-

neath the footsteps of the explorers.

They could see plainly enough in the weird twilight, strengthened as it was by the glimmering of the two moons, one of which was crescent and the other gibbous. Far-off, a row of mound-like hills, interspersed with sharp dolomites, was outlined on an afterglow of torrid saffron that soared in deepening rays to assail the green heavens. A few stars, and the other planets of the system, were visible.

Volmar and his men approached the edge of the hill-top. Below them, a long, undulant slope descended to a plain covered with the dark vegetation which they had descried from afar in space.

It was a mass of purples and blues and mauves, ranging from the palest to the darkest tints, and it seemed to vary in height from shrub-like growths to things that presented the size, if not the natural aspect, of full-grown forest trees. Some of the smaller forms, like an advance guard, had climbed mid-way on the acclivity. They were very heavy at the base, with dwindling boles like inverted carrots and many nodular outbranchings of an irregularity more grotesque than that of any terrene cacti. The lower branches appeared to touch the ground, with the ungainly sprawl of crab or tarantula legs.

"I'd like to have a look at those things," said Volmar. "Do you want to come with me, Roverton? The rest of you fellows had best remain within sight of the flier. We haven't seen any sort of animate life yet; but there's no telling what might be lurking in the neighborhood."

He and Roverton went down the slope, with the fungoid turf crunching beneath their feet. They neared the foremost plant-forms rather cautiously, remembering their unpleasant experiences with flesh-eating trees and vegetables in other worlds. These forms, however, though they were extremely uncouth and even ugly, displayed none of the usual characteristics of carnivorous plants.

"What are they?" Volmar was frankly puzzled. "Cacti? Fungi? Aerophytes? I don't believe they have any root-systems at all—they look as if one could knock them over very easily."

In the Pit!

HE approached one of the short, heavy boles, and pushed it with his foot. It fell to the ground and lay sprawling with its thick, ungainly limbs in the air. Unlike the tiny growths under-foot, it was very tough and rubbery, and none of its branches were broken or in any wise injured by the fall. On the contrary, they had bent with elastic ease where they were caught underneath the bole.

"The thing must be an air-plant," said Volmar. "I don't see any sign of root-attachments."

He was turning away, when Roverton touched his arm.

"What do you think of that, Captain?"

The overthrown plant was moving, albeit with great slowness and sluggishness, in a manifest effort to right itself. The top heaved, the branches that were doubled beneath it seemed to straighten and lengthen, while those beneath the base contracted. The thing was plainly trying to secure a sort of leverage. At last, after several vain attempts, it resumed an upright position, on the very same spot from which Volmar had displaced it.

"That's interesting," Volmar commented. "These things have the power of mobility when such is needed. I wouldn't be surprised if all this vegetation were migratory. Doubtless it has developed the ability to move from place to place on account of the severely changing climatic conditions. In all likelihood the habitable twilight zone shifts more or less during the planet's annual rotation, and these plants follow it, to avoid the extreme heat of full daylight or the utter cold of darkness. If there is any animal life, it is probably nomadic also."

"Shall we go on?" asked Roverton. "That forest at the bottom of the hill should be worthy of study."

"Alright," assented Volmar. "But we mustn't wander too far from the others. There's no use taking chances in an unexplored world—we've done that before and have gotten into some tight places."

A hundred yards, and they were among the outposts of the strange forest. Many of the growths resembled the first shrubs in type, though they were heavier and taller. Others grew in recumbent positions, like vast vegetable centipedes or many-legged monsters. Some retracted their outer limbs in a sluggish caution before the approach of the men; but most of them did not appear to move at all. There seemed to be nothing to fear from these plants; so Volmar and Roverton went on among the irregularly scattered groups, examining them with much curiosity. So far, they had seen no evidence whatever of animal or insect life.

In their scientific absorption, the explorers did not realize how far they had wandered, till they saw that the plants around them were becoming higher and thicker. Many of them were twenty or thirty feet tall; and they stood so close that further progress among them was difficult.

"I guess we'd better turn back," said Volmar.

They started to retrace their steps, which were plainly marked in the trodden fungi. To their surprise, when they had gone only a little distance, they found that the path was now blocked in many places by thickets of the strange trees, which must have closed in stealthily behind their passing, though no movement of this sort had been discernible at the time. Perhaps these plants had been impelled to follow them by some obscure instinct or stirring of curiosity. But evidently they were not aggressive or dangerous; and their motor activity was of the most torpid kind.

Because of this re-arrangement of the growths, however, the men were compelled to divagate fom their direct route as they returned toward the *Alcyone*. But they did not anticipate any real difficulty, and were not likely to go astray, since the low hill from which they had descended was visible in many places above the tops of the vegetation.

Presently they came to some old footmarks,

characterized by three toes of preternatural length and sharpness. The prints were very far apart, suggesting that their originator was possessed of phenomenally long legs.

Volmar and Roverton followed the tracks, insomuch as these appeared to be going in the general direction of the space-flier. But a little further on, in the lee of a dense clump of vegetation, the tracks entered a huge burrow, into which the men could almost have walked without stooping, on a gentle incline. Both eyed it rather warily as they passed; but there was no visible sign of its occupant.

"I'm not sure that I'd care to meet that customer, whatever it is," observed Roverton. "Probably it's some loathsome overgrown insect."

They had gone perhaps seventy feet beyond the burrow's entrance, when the ground suddenly caved in beneath Volmar, who was in the lead, and he disappeared from Roverton's sight. Hastening to the edge of the hole into which his companion had fallen, Roverton met a similar fate, for the ground crumbled beneath him and he was precipitated into a dark pit seven or eight feet deep, landing beside Volmar. Both were a little bruised by the fall but were otherwise unhurt. They had broken through into the burrow, whose entrance they could now see from where they were lying. The place was filled with a noisome, mephitic smell, and was damp with disagreeable oozings. Picking themselves up, the men started toward the entrance at once, hoping that the burrow's owner had not been aroused by their involuntary intrusion.

As they approached the mouth, they were startled by a medley of shrill, piping sounds which arose from without—the first sounds they had heard in this fantastic world. As they drew still nearer, they saw the silhouettes of two figures that were standing just outside the cave. The figures were bipedal, with thick legs of disproportionate shortness, and arms that reached almost to the ground. The heads could not be seen from within the tunnel. These extraordinary beings were stretching a narrow, heavy-stranded net, weighted at the ends with balls of metal or mineral, which they held between them across the entrance. They continued their piping noise; and their voices grew shriller still and took on an odd, cajoling note.

Volmar and Roverton had paused.

"Now what?" whispered Roverton.

"I think," Volmar whispered in reply, "that those creatures, whoever or whatever they are, must be waiting for the owner of the burrow to come out. They have tracked it, or perhaps have even driven it here. Probably they're planning to wind that net around its long legs when it emerges."

"Or," suggested Roverton, "maybe they saw us fall into the pit and are planning to take us captive."

They returned cautiously toward the caved-in portion of the burrow, and stopped when they saw that several more of the weird hunters, some of them equipped with nets and others armed with trident-headed lances, were grouped around the opening above and were peering down.

The heads of these beings were even more peculiar than their limbs, and were quite hideous from a human standpoint. They possessed three eyes, two of which were set obliquely in close juxtaposition to a slit-like mouth surrounded with waving or drooping tentacles, and the other near the top of a long, sloping brow that was lined with sparse bristles. There were rudimentary projections from each jowl, that might have been either ears or wattles; but nothing even remotely suggestive of nostrils was detectible. The whole expression was supremely wild and ferocious.

"Can't say that I admire the looks of those customers," murmured Roverton. "Plainly they're a hunting-party; and we, or the occupant of this burrow—or both—have been marked out as their meat."

The guards at the entrance had continued their piping song. Suddenly it seemed to find a far-off echo in the depths of the cavern. The sound approached and grew louder and shriller. Volmar and Roverton could see the gleaming of two greenish, phosphorescent eyes in the darkness beyond the circle of dim light that fell from the caved-in roof.

"The hunters are luring that beast," said Volmar, "by imitating the voices of its own kind."

He and Roverton, with their automatics ready, now retreated slowly toward the entrance, watching over their shoulders as they went the phosphoric eyes that continued to advance from the gloom.

Now they could see two enormous, spraddling, many-jointed legs, and a squat, shaggy face and globe-like body; and then the two hind-legs, as the creature came into the light. Somehow, it was more like an insect than an animal—like some Gargantuan, over-nourished arachnid.* As the monster passed beneath the opening, the two men saw the flash of a spear cast by one of the watchers above. It sank into the dark, hairy body, and the piping rose to a harsh scream, as the creature leapt forward upon Volmar and Roverton.

With their automatics flaming and crackling in the gloom, the men turned and ran toward the entrance. Their maddened pursuer, seemingly undeterred by the bullets, was close upon their heels.

The weighted net was still stretched across the burrow's mouth, and Volmar and Roverton now fired their last cartridges at the legs of the two beings who held it. Both of these creatures fell sprawling and dropped the net. The men burst forth into the light, only to find themselves confronted by a dozen similar beings, all armed with nets or spears. These bizarre hunters gave no evidence of fear or surprise at the appearance of the earthlings, but proceeded with calm, methodical swiftness to form in a ring.

The men rushed upon them, hoping to break through, but with ineludible speed and deftness each was entangled in the heavy meshes cast

* The family of arthropods which includes spiders, scorpions, mites, etc.

about him, and went to the ground with pinioned arms and legs. Their automatics had fallen from their fingers and were beyond reach. Lying helpless, they saw the emerging of the monster that had driven them from the burrow. It was neatly trapped in its turn by the guards; and it lay palpitating on the ground, bleeding a thick bluish fluid from the spear and bullet wounds it had received.

CHAPTER II.

The Dwarfs.

THE two men could scarcely move, so closely were the weighted meshes wound about them.

"This is a pretty tight situation," remarked Roverton, whose wit was unquenchable by any harship or danger, no matter how desperate.

"Yes, and it may be tighter before we are through," added Volmar grimly, as he lay staring up into the strange faces of their captors, who had gathered in a circle about the earth-men and were surveying them with manifest curiosity.

Seen close at hand, these beings were truly hideous and repulsive, though it was likely that they represented an evolutionary type similar in mental endowment to aboriginal man. They were of gigantic stature, averaging seven or eight feet. Their naked, dark-grey bodies were covered with a hairless skin marked off into rudimentary scales or plates, possibly denotive of some reptilian origin or affinity.

Their three eyes, their sloping brows and tentacle-fringed mouths gave them an indescribably weird appearance. Their long arms were triple-jointed, in opposition to the squat, single-jointed legs, which ended in webbed feet. Their fingers were seemingly boneless, but extremely powerful and supple, and were wrapped like tentacles about the terrific trident spears which they carried. The heads and shafts of these weapons were both made of the same copper-colored metal.

The hunters began to gibber among themselves, in guttural growling voices that were evidently their natural tones, and were quite unlike the shrill pipings with which they had lured the monster from its burrow. Their speech seemed to consist of monosyllabic sounds whose exact phonetic nature would have defied human imitation or classification.

After what was plainly a sort of debate two of the giants stepped forward and proceeded to unbind the legs of the earth-men, leaving their arms tied by the knotted nets, and prodded them roughly with spear-butts to make them stand up.

Volmar and Roverton scarcely needed this urging. They rose awkwardly and stiffly. Then, bearing them along in its midst, the whole party started off though the woods in an opposite direction from the hill on which the flier had landed. Some of the hunters had tied the trussed monster to a sort of light metal frame with handles and were carrying it among them. The two who had been wounded by the earth-men limped along in the rear. Short-legged as they were, these beings made rapid progress, and Volmar and Roverton were soon compelled to quicken their pace.

"Now whither?" asked Roverton. "I suppose you and I are going into the tribal pot along with that monster."

Volmar did not answer. He was examining the net by which his arms were bound. It was made of a finely linked metal, like highly tempered copper, and was very strong. The workmanship was so delicate and regular as to arouse wonderment. Also, the spears carried by the giants were exquisitely wrought.

"I wonder," soliloquised Volmar, "if these nets and weapons were made by their owners?"

"Probably," said Roverton. "Of course, the work seems to betaken a considerable degree of manual skill and civilization; and these beings are a pretty low and bestial-looking lot from a human esthetic view-point. But after all we can't tell much about them from their appearance. All the extraplanetary peoples we have met were more or less monstrous according to our standards."

"That's true," assented Volmar slowly. "But somehow I have a hunch that our captors aren't the only beings on this world."

"Maybe; but I'm not very curious to know. I hope Jasper and the others will follow our trail—they must be worrying about us by now. A little rescue party would certainly be welcome."

"We may have to rescue ourselves—it all depends on what we get into. Our captors are doubtless nomads who roam from place to place in the twilight zone, like the vegetation. There's no telling what sort of abodes they have—if any. It is possible that they may dwell underground."

"I've had enough burrows for one day!" ejaculated Roverton. "Also, I'm not likely to forget the experience that Deming, Adams and myself had with those troglodyte pygmies in Andromeda."*

SEVERAL miles were traversed by the party. The way led deviously over a flat plain, amid clumps of the rootless vegetation. The row of mound-like hills and sharp dolomites which the men had seen from the *Alcyone's* landing-place was now very near. The trees became sparser, and ended on the verge of a shallow, rock-trewn valley where thin streams of water ran tortuously down to a long, winding lake.

Crossing this valley, whose soil was covered by small fungi, and fording one of the streams, the party entered a deep gorge which wound slowly upward among the further hills. Here there were deep chasms, and crags of roughly splintered stone with outcroppings of unknown metal, and dark torrents that fumed with iridescent vapors. However, there was a well-marked path, and progress was not difficult.

Now the path began to slope downward. Soon the party emerged in an amphitheater surrounded by crags and pinnacles. Here an unexpected sight awaited the earth-men. To one side, in the lee of a cliff, were a number of rude stone huts;

* See "Marooned in Andromeda" by Clark Ashton Smith, October 1930 Wonder Stories.

and in the middle of the amphitheater there reposed a huge, glittering object, perfectly oval in form, and plainly of an artificial nature.

"I'll wager," cried Roverton, "that that thing is some kind of air-vessel, or even space-craft."

"I never bet," rejoined Volmar. "But I shouldn't be surprised if you were right."

Many figures were moving about the oval object; and as the party drew nearer, it could be seen that they were not all of the same type or species. Many were like the hunters who had captured Volmar and Roverton; but others differed as widely from these as the hunters differed in their turn from the earth-men.

They were about four feet tall, with spindling limbs and delicate bodies, pinched in the center like those of ants, and heads of such disproportionate size as to give at once the impression of artificial masks. These creatures were gorgeously colored, with all the hues of the harlequin opal, and contrasted extremely with the dark giants.

Seen closer at hand, the oval object revealed a series of small ports filled with a vitreous, violet-hued material, and an open circular door in its side from which a stair-case of light aerial structure, doubtless collapsible, ran to the ground.

The two groups of unearthly beings were engaged in a lively conversation, and the gruff gutturals of the giants were surmounted by the sweet, piercing sibilants of the dwarfs. Several strange animals of varying size and monstrosity, bound with nets, were lying on the ground at one side; and some of the dwarfs were bringing copper-colored nets and spears and other weapons or implements of more doubtful use from the interior of the oval vessel. When some of these articles were handed over to the giants, the earth-men surmised that they were being bartered in exchange for the trussed animals.

"What did I tell you?" cried Volmar. "I knew that those nets and tridents weren't made by our captors. And I doubt very much if the dwarfs are natives of this planet at all. I believe they have come from a neighboring world of this same solar system. Possibly they are zoologists, and are collecting specimens of the local fauna. I think those head-pieces of theirs are respirative masks—they don't seem to fit with the rest of their anatomy. No doubt they are unable to breathe the atmosphere of this world, at least in its pure state; and it is probable that those masks include some sort of filtering apparatus. There is nothing to be discerned in the nature of air-tanks."

Seeing the approach of the hunters with Volmar and Roverton in their midst, the two groups interrupted their bargaining and stared in silence at the new-comers. The heads, or masks, of the dwarfs were fitted with two pairs of green eyes, set vertically and far apart; and their gaze was uncannily intent and wholly unchanging. The eyes were divided into many facets, like those of an insect, and blazed with emerald light.

Between and below the eyes there was a short, trumpet-like attachment, which doubtless served as a mouth-piece; and its hollow tube might well have contained the filtering apparatus surmised by Volmar. Two curving horns, perforated like flutes, arose from the sides of those curious heads, and suggested an auditory mechanism. The limbs and torsos of the dwarfs were seemingly nude, and glittered like the shards of bright-colored beetles, with nacreous lights that ran and melted into each other with every movement.

A brief interval of silence, as if all these beings were overcome with amazement at the appearance of Volmar and Roverton; and then the dwarfs began to talk and gesticulate excitedly among themselves, pointing at the earth-men with their thin, pipe-like arms, which ended in rather intricate-looking hands whose fingers were fine as antennae. Then they addressed the giant hunters in tones of interrogation, and a long discussion followed.

Some of the dwarfs approached Volmar and Roverton and examined their clothing, masks and oxygen-tanks with minute attention. The tanks, which were built into the suits of flexible vitriolene, were apparently a source of special interest. There was much argument among the dwarfs in their sweet, hissing voices; and it was plain that some were maintaining one theory and some another. Their whole air was one of great puzzlement and perplexity.

"I'll bet," said Roverton, "that they think we're some new species of animal native to this world, and are trying to classify us."

"They have the look of investigative scientists," agreed Volmar. "And it must be giving them a lot of trouble to place us in their system of biology or zoology."

Now the dwarfs addressed themselves again to the hunters. There was much voluble expostulation on both sides.

"Guess they're trying to drive a bargain for us," conjectured Roverton. "And the hunters want full value in trade before they part with such rare specimens."

A little later, to confirm this surmise, the dwarfs brought out a pile of odd but exquisitely wrought implements, some of which were perhaps designed for culinary use, and several large bell-shaped receptacles of semi-vitreous earthenware filled with varicolored materials that resembled roughly-ground farinaceous food-stuffs.

These were laid before the hunters, who continued to demur and chaffer; and then some huge, abdominous bottles, made of an unidentifiable substance that was neither glass nor metal nor porcelain, were brought forth and added to the pile. Their contents were past the conjecture of the earth-men, but obviously they were prized by the giants and were considered as clinching the bargain.

The chaffering came to an end, and attention was turned to the mounded monster which the giants had captured with Volmar and Roverton. The dwarfs appeared to be rather dubious about purchasing this creature, and examined its wounds in a somewhat cursory manner. Their decision was plainly negative; for after a little

while the captors of the earth-men, as well as the other group of giants, broke up and went away in the direction of the stone huts, bearing the various articles of barter and the dying animal as well as several other curious creatures which the dwarfs for one reason or another had declined to buy.

"Sold!" laughed Roverton, as he peered at the unique menagerie of which he and Volmar were seemingly a part. There were at least a dozen of these quaint monsters, who represented the fauna of the planet. Some were undreamable mixtures of serpentine, insect and mammalian forms, others were loathsome, enormous annalids, and others still were not alliable with any known genus or combination of genera. Many were plainly ferocious, and were still struggling convulsively against their bonds. Anyone who came within reach of their dart-like talons or saw-like teeth would have fared badly.

"I wonder how the dwarfs are going to handle them?" questioned Volmar, as he eyed the contrast between these monsters, many of which were quite huge and bulky, and the frail iridescent beings.

As if in answer to his query, a tackle of strong metallic-looking ropes was lowered from the door of the vessel. Then two dwarfs, armed with long rods of a dull bluish material terminating in circular disks covered with blunt prongs of some brighter substance, came forward from amid the group. Each applied the end of his rod to the spine of one of the struggling animals.

Instantly, with a single shudder, the monsters lay still, as if dead. Manifestly some paralyzing force was emitted by the rods. The lowered ropes were then fastened about the inert monsters by other dwarfs, and they were hauled up by a sort of mechanical windlass and disappeared within the oval vessel. Two more were treated in the same manner; and then the rod-bearers approached Volmar and Roverton.

"Hell! they're going to lay us out too," cried Roverton. He and Volmar looked about at the dwarfs, who surrounded them in a circle. Many of these frail beings were armed with the strange rods or with other instruments of dubious nature. But with their attenuated arms and pinched bodies they did not seem very formidable.

"Let's make a break for it," said Volmar. He and Roverton leapt back from the advancing rod-bearers, and hurled themselves at the circle. The dwarfs gave way, avoiding them with agility; and one of them reached out with his rod and touched Volmar on the chest while another caught Roverton in the abdomen.

Neither was aware of any shock from the contact: the effect was more that of some narcotic or anaesthetic, pervading the entire body with instant numbness and insensibility. Darkness seemed to rush upon them from all sides, and both men became totally unconscious.

CHAPTER III.

A Desperate Situation.

EMERGING from the bournless midnight of oblivion, Roverton heard a deep thrumming sound which conveyed at once to his reviving brain the idea of some powerful mechanism. The sound was incessant and appeared to come from above. Roverton could feel its vibration in all the tissues of his body.

Opening his eyes, he received a series of visual impressions which for the moment were altogether confusing and were quite meaningless. There was a bright chaos of lights, of unearthly forms and angles, which baffled his brain. Then his eyes began to establish a sort of order, and he realized that he was lying on the floor of an unfamiliar structure, made of transparent panes in a frame-work of massive metal bars. The structure was perhaps seven feet in height by nine in diameter, and was shaped like a huge box or cage.

Volmar, still unconscious, was lying beside him; and both Volmar and himself were no longer bound by the copperish nets. Between the bars he could see other structures of a similar type, in which the monsters trapped by the giant hunters and sold to the dwarfs were reposing.

Some of these creatures were beginning to recover from their paralysis, while others were still insensible and immobile. The cages were in a long room with curving walls and a low, arched ceiling. There were numerous ports in the walls, which gave a rich purple light through their stained transparency.

Roverton was still bewildered as he studied these details. Then, as remembrance returned, he understood. He and Volmar were on board the oval vessel; and the deep thrumming sound was the noise of its engines. If, as he had surmised, the vessel was an ether-ship, they were now in the midst of interplanetary space on their way to some unknown world!

Stunned and overwhelmed by the situation, he turned again to Volmar, and saw that the Captain was beginning to revive. His eyes opened, his fingers stirred; and then he lifted his right arm, rather feebly. A moment more, and he spoke.

"Where are we, Roverton?"

"I don't know, exactly. But we're all boxed up and ready for delivery to the zoo, wherever it is. And I think we are now in mid-space. In all likelihood the planet to which we are being taken is one that belongs to this same system. There are four worlds, as you will remember, and there's no telling which one is our destination. Our chances of ever seeing the *Alcyone* again are none too gaudy under the circumstances. Hell, what a prospect!"

"The situation is rather dubious, to say the least," assented Volmar. "Apart from our ignorance as to where we are being taken, and the practical impossibility of escape or rescue, we shall soon have the problems of air and food to cope with—problems for which there is no solution as far as I can see.

"Our air-masks and tanks have not been tampered with; and we had a twelve hours' supply of compressed air when we left the *Alcyone*. But since we do not know how long we have been unconscious, we cannot compute how much of the

supply still remains; and in any case asphyxiation is highly probable at no remote time."

Roverton had been inspecting the cage with careful attention. He now noticed a curving metal tube which entered it through the floor at one end. Putting his hand over the mouth of the tube, he felt an air-current.

"I think," he remarked, "that our cage, and doubtless the others, are being supplied with some sort of compressed air—probably the atmosphere of the Mercurian world on which we were captured. No doubt the air in the room itself is that of the world to which the dwarfs are native, and is not respirable by these monsters."

The room had been untenanted, save for the earth-men and their fellow-captives. Now Volmar and Roverton saw that five of the opalescent dwarfs had suddenly appeared, carrying receptacles of exotic forms, some of which were filled with liquids and others with objects resembling truffles and tubers. The dwarfs proceeded to open a panel worked by some hidden spring in the side of each cage and then introduced into each a vessel filled with fluid and one filled with the unknown food-stuffs. This was done very quickly and cautiously, and a mechanical arm-like apparatus was used in the actual transmission of the vessels. Afterwards the panels were closed immediately.

When all the cages had been supplied in this manner, the dwarfs stood watching their occupants, who in most cases were greedily absorbing the food and water. The earth-men perceived that the dwarfs were now without their masks, revealing a physiognomy with elaborate eyes, proboscides and antennae, such as might well be looked for in connection with their delicate bodies.

When they noticed that Volmar and Roverton made no effort to touch the provender, the five dwarfs gathered about their cage, eyeing them curiously and carrying on an eager discussion or disputation.

"I'M hungry and thirsty enough," confided Roverton to the Captain. "But how is one to eat and drink through a respirative mask—even granting that that stuff is fit for human consumption? However, I suppose the dwarfs think the masks are part of our anatomy, along with the suits and tanks. They must be pretty dumb not to realize that we are intelligent beings, who make use of artificial contrivances even as they themselves."

"Literal-mindedness isn't confined to human beings, I suspect," said Volmar. "These fellows are evidently taking us at our face value. They found us on the Mercurian world, along with the zoological specimens they were collecting; and doubtless it never occurred to them that we might have come there in a space-ship, like themselves.

"Anyway they are probably so conceited as to believe that their own world is the only one capable of producing highly evolved and intelligent life-forms. Such conceit, as you know, is notunusual. I remember, back in my boyhood, before space-travel became an actuality, how many of our own astronomers and other scientists argued that the earth was the only world in all the universe that was inhabitable by any kind of organic life."

Presently the dwarfs departed; and time wore on. Overcome by their strange and perilous situation, the earth-men talked in a desultory manner, and lapsed into lengthening intervals of silence. They studied the interior of their prison, wondering if it would be possible to break out. The panes, whether of glass or some other transparent material, were enormously thick and were manifestly very strong; and anyway, escape would have been futile under the circumstances. Nevertheless, the idea appealed to them. Any sort of action, no matter how desperate or hopeless, seemed preferable to the monotony of supine waiting.

Roverton now inspected the vessel containing the tuber-like objects. It was made of earthenware and was quite heavy. Roverton emptied the contents on the floor, and then hurled the object with all his strength at one of the vitreous panes. There was a terrible crash; but to the amazement of himself and Volmar, neither the vessel nor the pane was broken or even splintered or cracked by the impact. Both the earthenware and the transparent material, it was obvious, were possessed of an iron toughness not characteristic of such substances in their mundane forms.

"Well, that's that." Roverton's tone was rueful. "I guess we're not going to bust out in a hurry."

He and Volmar were consumed by growing thirst and hunger. They began to eye the water and food-stuffs avidly.

"What do you say we try it?" Roverton suggested.

"Go ahead. If you survive, I'll experiment myself. But be careful."

Roverton unfastened his helmet and removed it very cautiously. He took a deep breath. The air in the cage was heavy, with a queer smell that stung his nostrils and smarted in his lungs. It was breathable enough, as far as he could tell, though its cumulative effect on the human respiratory mechanism was an uncertain quantity.

He raised the deep vessel containing the water to his lips, and sipped it. The fluid was semi-opaque and flavorless. Then, gingerly, he picked up one of the tubers, which was about the size and shape of a large potato, and bit into it. The thing was tough-skinned, with a porous, fungoid-looking interior, and its taste was unpleasantly bitter. Roverton made a wry face, as he swallowed a scanty mouthful.

"CAN'T say that I care for the grub." He returned to the water and sipped a little more of it while Volmar proceeded to remove his own mask. Roverton then passed him the water and Volmar drank some of it cautiously and afterwards sampled one of the tubers but rejected it summarily without swallowing any of the unpalatable substance.

"I'm dubious of that stuff," he observed. "As you know, lots of things which are perfectly

good foods for ultra-terrestrial life-forms are sheer poison for us. I hope you didn't swallow much of it."

"Only a little," rejoined Roverton. "And maybe the stuff is poisonous—I don't believe I feel so very well." A sudden sickness had come upon him, with vertigo and violent internal pains and he sat down on the floor of the cage.

Volmar began to feel a little sick himself; and since he had not eaten any of the tuber, he concluded that the unfamiliar water, and perhaps the air, were contributing to this condition. However, he did not develop the agonizing pains, fever and delirium which progressively characterized Roverton's case. Writhing convulsively, moaning, and out of his head half the time, Roverton lay on the floor while Volmar watched beside him, totally unable, for lack of medicinal remedies or even precise knowledge, to do anything that would palliate his sufferings.

An hour or two passed in this manner without bringing any marked change in the sick man's condition. Absorbed in his vigil, Volmar did not perceive the approach of two dwarfs who had entered the room, till he heard the excited babble of their shrill voices. They were standing beside the cage and were gesticulating with much animation as they peered at himself and Roverton.

Volmar was puzzled by their excitement, till he remembered that he and Roverton were now without their masks and that the dwarfs had never seen them before in such disattire. Evidently the discovery that the masks were artificial and removable had provoked much interest.

After a minute or so the dwarfs hastened from the room, and soon returned in company with half a dozen others, who surrounded the cage and peered at the earth-men with their bulging, many-angled orbs. Much debate was going on among them; but Volmar was too deeply worried about his comrade's condition to give more than a perfunctory attention to their gestures and crowding faces. Also he was beginning to feel a little light-headed, probably from some element in the air that was ill-suited to human respiration. His brain attached no significance to the re-departure of one of the dwarfs; and even when this being came back a minute later, bearing two of the strange anaesthetic rods, Volmar remembered with apathetic slowness and indifference the former use which had been made of these instruments.

Very quickly and cautiously, one of the dwarfs opened a panel in the cage. Two others, standing in readiness with the rods, thrust their weapons with equal quickness through the opening and applied them to the two men. Instantly, as before, Volmar fell senseless; and the sick, delirious Roverton ceased to moan and mutter and lapsed into merciful oblivion.

CHAPTER IV.

The Amazing Planet.

THE men awakened simultaneously from their ond plunge into this mysterious anaesthesia. The circumstances under which they found themselves were even more baffling and more incredible than their confused senses could at first comprehend.

It was evident at once that they were no longer on the ether-ship, for the room in which they were lying was very spacious and was walled and roofed and floored with an alabaster-like stone of great luster and beauty. There were many open windows, of an oval form, through which bewildering glimpses of an intricate alien architecture were visible against a glaring violet sky. The impression conveyed was that they were in an upper story of some lofty edifice. The air was pervaded by a tropic warmth.

They were lying on a broad couch, covered with a flossy, mottled material of red and saffron, and inclined at an angle of perhaps fifteen degrees. The room was furnished with several small tables, supported on frail, spidery legs and littered with outlandish implements and quaintly shaped vials such as the surgeons or chemists of an unknown world might employ. Except for Volmar and Roverton, the room was seemingly untenanted.

More curious even than their surroundings, however, were the sensations of the two men. Contrary to all natural expectation, there was no least trace of illness, hunger, thirst or fatigue on the part of either. Also, with a feeling that amounted to stupefaction, both realized that they were breathing a pure, well-oxygenated air—and that they were wearing their masks, which must have been replaced during their period of unconsciousness.

It seemed as if the air-supply in the tanks must in some unaccountable manner have been renewed by their captors. Both men were conscious of a singular buoyancy, a remarkable alertness and bodily well-being.

"Are you all right?" asked Volmar, as he sat up on the couch and turned to Roverton.

"Never better in my life. But I can't understand why I should feel that way. The last I can remember is being deadly sick in that infernal menagerie cage. And where are we, anyway? It certainly looks as if we had arrived somewhere."

"I judge," answered Volmar, "that we are on the particular planetary body to which our captors belong. Plainly, when they found us with our masks off, they realized that we were intelligent beings like themselves, and not mere monsters; and they have been treating us since with more consideration. They must have analyzed the remaining air in our tanks, and then replenished it with a synthetic substitute of their own. What else they've done to us I don't know. But probably we'll find out before long."

"Speaking for myself," said Roverton, "I feel as if I had been well-dined and wined, and had received a shot in the arm to boot. They must have found some way to feed us while we were unconscious—and something non-poisonous and assimilable by the human organism to feed us with."

"Truly," admitted Volmar, "it is a remarkable situation. I don't know how it will all end; but

we are lucky to be alive under the circumstances. And no doubt there are some even more extraordinary experiences in store for us."

"I don't care how extraordinary they are," returned Roverton. "I'd rather be back on board the *Alcyone*. What do you suppose Jasper and Deming and the rest are doing anyway? There isn't one chance in a billion that they could follow us or find out what has happened to us. Probably they are combing that damned Mercurian planet in an effort to discover what has swallowed us up."

"They may have seen the departure of the strange ether-ship. Whether or not it would occur to them that we were on board is another matter. And even if they did figure this out, it would be a miracle if they could have done it quickly enough to follow the alien flier, keep it in sight, and locate its destination."

Before Roverton could reply, he and Volmar saw that three dwarfs were standing beside them. These beings were taller, with a more authoritative bearing, with more delicate antennae and proboscides than the ones they had seen on the space-vessel; and their coloration took a deep red and orange and Tyrian* tones. With queer, jerky genuflections, like nodding insects, they addressed the men. Their words were scarcely articulate to human ears; but an idea of formal courtesy and obeisance was somehow conveyed.

Volmar and Roverton, rising to their feet, returned the valediction in the best manner they could muster.

Plucking the sleeves of the mens' clothing with their antennal fingers, with elaborate gestures whose meaning was obvious, the dwarfs led the way through an odd, elliptical door that had been concealed from sight in an angle of the wall. Thence, at the end of a short passage, the party emerged on a sort of balcony.

The earth-men gave an involuntary gasp of amazement and were seized by an instant dizziness as they approached the verge; for the balcony was merely a scant ledge without walls, railings or hand-holds of any kind; and below, at an awful depth, were the streets of a monstrous city. It was like looking down froom a precipice into some alpine chasm.

All around and above there soared other buildings of the same white material and the same bizarre structure as the one on whose balcony the earth-men were standing. These edifices were of colossal extent and many of them culminated in airy spires and pinnacles of a fairy-delicacy, thronging the bright purple heavens like a host of shining obelisks.

At frequently recurring intervals, the buildings were connected by bridges of a gossamer thinness and fragility, which formed a gleaming web-work in the air. They were wrought of that pale, alabastrine substance; and one of them issued, without sign of jointure, from the narrow ledge at the earth-men's feet, and ran to the midway story of a titan pile that was more than fifty yards distant.

* Violet—purple.

THE scene, in its crowding, multiform strangeness, was such as to bewilder and baffle human vision. All was incognizably foreign—a teeming babel of undreamt and baroque architectural forms. Far down in the abysmal streets, and on the lofty bridges, the frail people of the city passed like iridescent motes. All was weirdly silent, apart from certain recurrent rumblings and mutterings which seemed to come from underground, like the pulsing of hidden, gigantic engineries.

Spell-bound by the vision, and dazed by its vistas, Volmar and Roverton became slowly aware that one of their guides had stepped from the balcony to the bridge and was signing them to follow.

"Holy smoke!" was Roverton's exclamation. "Are we supposed to walk on that?"

The railless bridge was barely a yard in width, and the drop to the street below was terrific—at least a full half-mile. The guide, however, seemed to possess the equilibrium of a bird or an insect. His two companions were standing behind the earth-men, and were armed with weapons like double-pointed goads. As Volmar and Roverton hesitated, these beings came forward, lifting the formidable points in a gesture of menace.

"Well," said Volmar, "I guess we'd better move along. After all, the bridge isn't quite so bad as a tight-rope."

The earth-men followed their guide, who was tripping lightly and unconcernedly before them. Accustomed as they were to cosmic elevations, they did not care to peer downward at the awful gulfs on either hand, but kept their eyes on the balcony ahead. With short and careful paces, they managed to cross the long, attenuated span. It seemed to take them a long time; and they gained their goal with much relief.

Looking back from their new vantage, they saw that the building they had left was much lower than those around it, and possessed a flat, towerless roof. Several glittering vessels, similar to the one in which they had travelled through space from the Mercurian world, were lying on the edge of this roof, which was plainly a landing-stage for such craft. Beyond, were rows of high towers, some of which were inclined at oblique angles and were inter-connected in the same fashion as the main structures.

They were now conducted into the heart of the edifice in which that precarious bridge had ended. Through labyrinthine corridors, and down slanting floors and serpentining stairs with awkward little steps, they were led for a distance impossible to estimate. They soon passed from purple daylight to the red, unflickering glare of columnar flames that issued from black, funnel-shapen vases.

The building appeared to be a sort of scientific laboratory. On every hand, in rooms of an asymmetrical construction, they saw the curious apparatus of a foreign and inconceivably advanced chemistry. People of the dwarf race were busy everywhere with arcanic tests and abstruse labors. They paid little heed to the earth-men, and were intently absorbed in the queer crucibles,

vats, alembics and other mechanisms of a less classifiable nature which they tended.

At last the earthlings and their guides entered a vast room, filled with transparent cages, most of which were occupied by fearsome and variegated monsters. Among these, the men recognzied certain of their former companions in captivity. Some of the creatures had been rendered unconscious; and dwarfs wearing atmospheric masks had entered their cages and by means of little suction-pumps attached to crystalline vials were extracting various amounts of the life-fluids, or perhaps of certain special glandular secretions, from the motionless monsters. Somewhat sickened, Volmar and Roverton watched the flowing of diverse-colored fluids into the vials as they went by.

"So that's the game," was Roverton's comment. "But I wonder what they use the stuff for."

"There's no telling. Those fluids may provide valuable serums for aught we know; or they may be used in the compounding of drugs, or even be employed as food."

Passing between endless rows of cages, they reached an open space at the center of the huge apartment. Here, from floor to ceiling, there ran a great circular upright tube of the same transparent material as the cages. It was at least eight feet in diameter. Pausing before it, the guide touched its apparently unbroken surface with his fingers, and a section of the wall swung open on almost invisible hinges, leaving a small doorway. Volmar and Roverton were motioned to enter.

They obeyed, with much wonder and dubiety, and the door was closed upon them. They found that they were standing on a floor of some nacreous mineral. Above them, where it met the ceiling at a height of thirty feet, the tube ended in a dull, greyish disk.

"Now what?" Roverton's voice was unnaturally loud and resonant in the closed columnar space.

The Examination

A NUMBER of the laboratory attendants had gathered and were standing about the tube with their fantastic faces pressed against its wall. As if in answer to Roverton's query, one of them raised his arm with a swift and sweeping gesture.

It must have been a signal. Immediately, as if some hidden switch had been turned on, the earth-men were dazzled by a ruddy light that fell upon them from above. Glancing up, they saw that the grey disk had become luminous as a great fiery jewel. Soon the radiance changed from red to green, and then from green to blue, from blue to violet, from violet to an insupportable whiteness fraught with the immanence of ultra-spectral hues. Looking down, through the blurs of color that clung to their vision, the men saw that the floor was glowing like molten metal and was becoming translucent beneath the weird ray.

Then, all at once, they perceived an even stranger thing. Each saw that the vitriolene of his companion's suit and helmet had grown transparent, revealing every feature of head and body. Then the flesh itself grew gradually diaphanous, showing every bone and internal organ as if floating in some clear solution. Stage by state, not with the shadowing of the X-ray, but with full color and minutest detail, the process went on, while the outer portions turned to a ghostly outline. Simultaneously, the men were aware of an icy sensation, that seemed to pierce their very vitals inch by inch along with the penetrating beam.

They felt a strange faintness, as if they were becoming actually insubstantial. All about them seemed to waver and recede, and they saw as from a fluctuating distance the intent, unreadable staring of the dwarfs.

The white ray was suddenly turned off, and the men resumed their normal tangibility of aspect. Both however, were still faint and chilly from the unfamiliar force to which they had been subjected.

The door was opened, and they were signalled to come forth. They tottered with a queer weakness as they stepped out into the main room.

The dwarfs began to disperse, till only the three guides remained. Volmar and Roverton, reeling with a sickness that persisted and grew upon them, were led through halls and chambers of which they were hardly cognizant, and were thrust into a small room whose door was then closed with a gong-like clang. The room was occupied by four dwarfs who wore atmospheric masks, and was filled with mysterious implements that were sinister as those of a torture-chamber.

Here the men were directed to remove their suits and helmets. They obeyed, recovering sufficient mental clarity to realize that the air in the shut room was the same that they had been breathing from their tanks. Evidently it had been prepared for their reception.

Neither could remember fully afterwards the complicated and peculiar tests through which they were put during the next hour. Ill and confused and faint, they were dimly conscious of multiform instruments that were applied to their bodies, of changing lights that blinded them, of the purring and clicking of coiled mechanisms, and the high sibilant voices of their examiners conferring together. It was an ordeal such as no human beings had ever before undergone.

Toward the end, through clouds of numbness and confusion, they felt a stinging sensation in their chests, and each realized vaguely that an incision had been made in his flesh with a tiny tusk-like knife and that suction-pumps of the same type as those employed in drawing animal fluids from the caged monsters were being applied to these incisions.

Dully and half-obliviously, they watched the blood that was drawn slowly through thin black elastic tubes into squat-bellied bottles of gill capacity. Their brains were unable to attach any real meaning to this process; and it would not have occurred to them to resist. They accepted it as a part of a senseless and troublous delirium.

Both were on the point of virtual collapse from

their increasing *malaise*. They scarcely noticed when the tubes were withdrawn and the filled bottles corked and laid carefully aside. Nor did they perceive the subsequent action of their examiners till there came a sharp prickling in their shoulders. Almost immediately their senses cleared, and they saw that a light-green fluid was being injected into their veins by transparent hypodermics with double needles curved like serpents' teeth.

The fluid must have been a powerful drug, for every sign of illness or even nervousness disappeared within a minute or two after its administration. Both men felt the same sense of well-being, of mental alertness and physical fitness and buoyancy, with which they had awakened from their last period of unconsciousness. They surmised that they were not experiencing the effects of the drug for the first time.

"Well," remarked Roverton, "that dope is what you might call an all-round panacea. I don't feel as if there ever had been or ever could be anything the matter with me. The stuff seems to take the place of food, drink and medicine."

"It's a pretty fair tonic," agreed Volmar. "But watch out for the possible hang-over."

Now, with returning normality, they observed the vials of drawn blood; and the memory of what had happened came back to them with a new potentiality of significance.

"I hope," said Roverton, "that these people will be satisfied before they reach the dissection stage. Apparently they mean to learn all they can about us. Do you suppose they are trying to determine our fitness to become citizens of their world?"

"That's not so unlikely. Or perhaps they are trying to find out what use they can make of us, what particular sort of serum or gland-extract we might afford. Personally, I have an intuition that there is something pretty horrible behind all this."

CHAPTER V.

Revolt!

THE examination was seemingly over. The men were signalled to resume their clothing and helmets. Then the door was opened, and they were permitted to emerge. Their examiners followed, bringing the vials of blood, and removing the masks which had been worn for protection in that specially prepared atmosphere.

Many of the dwarfs in the outer room thronged curiously around and seemed to be questioning the examiners. These beings, however, were intent on some purpose of their own, and gave brief answers to the inquiries as they led Volmar and Roverton through the clustering laboratory workers and down a hall where the customary red flames that illumined the building were succeeded by others of a cold, lunar blue.

Their destination proved to be a circular apartment with similar lighting. Here a dozen dwarfs were gathered, as if to await the earth-men and their conductors. All were the usual type in regard to size, formation and markings, with the exception of two who appeared to represent a cruder and more primitive race of the same species, with duller coloring and less finely developed proboscides and antennae.

Most of them were seated on spidery-looking stools arranged in a semi-circle. Some were armed with anaesthetic rods, and others carried instruments or weapons that consisted of thin ebon-black shafts with glowing cones of a cold green fire, possibly radio-active, at one end. The two who suggested an aboriginal type were standing, and neither carried any weapon or implement. Near them was a little table on which hypodermics and other instruments were displayed.

"What's all this? Another test?" muttered Roverton.

"We'll soon see."

Two of the examiners, each bearing one of the vials of human blood in his delicate, sinuous fingers, came forward and conferred with the seated beings.

Then, by the former, two crystal hypodermics were filled with blood from the vials. Their bearers approached the aboriginals, who maintained a stolid and indifferent air, and proceeded to puncture the abdomens of their ant-shapen bodies with the fang-like needles and inject the blood till the hypodermics were empty.

All the assembled beings looked on in attentive silence, like a medical conclave. Volmar and Roverton, fascinated and a little horrified by this mysterious experiment, were unable to speak.

"Trying it on the dogs, eh?" Roverton finally whispered.

Volmar made no answer; and the words had barely passed Roverton's lips when the two aboriginals suddenly lost their impassivity and began to leap and twist as if in terrible pain. Then they fell to the floor with vehement cries that were half hisses, half shrieks. Both were swelling visibly, as if from the effects of some deadly poison; and the dull-hued integument of their bodies was blackening moment by moment. The injected venom of a hundred cobras could not have produced a more immediate or more appalling result.

"Who could have imagined that?" said Volmar, in low tones of dismay and consternation.

"It certainly looks as if human blood didn't mix very well with the life-fluid of these creatures." Roverton was too horrified to make any further or crisper comment.

The convulsions of the agonized victims were lessening by ghastly degrees; and their cries grew fainter, like the hiss of dying serpents. Their heads, bodies, and even their antennae, were puffed beyond recognition and had turned to a putrid purple-black. With a few final spasms and twitches, they lay still and did not stir again.

"Ugh! I hope the doctors are satisfied with their experiment." It was Roverton who spoke. He and Volmar tore their eyes away from the ghastly sight on the floor in time to see that one of the seated conclave-members had risen and was moving toward them, lifting as he came the ebon shaft with fiery terminal cone which he carried.

The use of this implement, the nature of the

cold green flame, and the purpose of its bearer, were all equally uncertain. As the men afterwards reflected, the dwarf's intentions were not necessarily hostile, and may have been those of mere curiosity. But their nerves were on edge with all the cryptical, uncanny adventures and experiences they had gone through, and following on the hideous outcome of the experiment they had just beheld, the sudden movement of the dwarf was fraught with connotations of unknowable menace.

Roverton, who stood a little in advance of Volmar, sprang to one side before the dwarf, and seized the fragile-looking table that was supported on tarantula-like legs. Hypodermics, vials, and other utensils of an unknown medical art clattered on the floor, as he lifted the table and held it in front of him like a shield. Then, facing the suspected assailant, he began to retreat toward the open door with Volmar at his side.

The dwarf, it would seem, was puzzled or confounded by this action for an instant. He paused, then came on with a loud, sibilant cry, waving his weapon. His confreres, rising from their seats in a body, also followed, and ran to intercept the men before they could escape from the room. Their movements were quick as the darting of angry insects.

Swinging the table aloft, Roverton hurled it in the face of his attacker. The creature was beaten down, releasing the lambent-headed wand as he fell; and it shot forward and dropped at Rovertson's feet. In a flash, Roverton picked it up, and he and Volmar sprang for the door.

TWO dwarfs, fleeter than the others, had managed to head them off and were standing on the threshold. Both were armed with the familiar anaesthetic rods.

Not knowing the properties of the implement which he had snatched from its fallen bearer, but surmising that it must have some efficacious use, Roverton charged the two beings in the doorway. His superior length of arm enabled him to smite one of them on the breast with the green cone, while he himself avoided their paralyzing weapons. The effect of his blow was amazing and terrific: the glowing cone, whatever it was, seemed to burn an instant way through the bodily substance of the dwarf, like white-hot iron in butter. The creature fell dead with a dark and gaping hole in his bosom, and Roverton surprised and thrown off his balance, barely evaded the outflung rod of the other.

However, with a deftness that would have done honor to a professional swordsman, he swerved his weapon, almost continuing its initial movement, and smote the body of the second dwarf, who went down beside the first.

All this had occurred in a mere fraction of time, and a split-second of faltering or a single misstep would have been fatal. The earth-men leapt across the fallen bodies and cleared the threshold just in time to evade the main group of their pursuers.

They were in a long corridor, wholly deserted for the nonce, which led on one hand to the huge room of monster-cages, and on the other to parts as yet unknown. They chose the latter direction. Their situation was irredeemably desperate, and even if they could escape from the building, they would find themselves hemmed in at every turn by the perils and pitfalls of a world inevitably hostile to human life through its very strangeness. But, after their captivity, and the queer ordeals to which they had perforce submitted, it was good to move freely again, even though their flight could only end in recapture or the unconceived horror of some strange death.

They sprinted down the corridor, with a dozen dwarfs at their heels, and found that their longer legs would enable them to distance their pursuers by degrees. At intervals they met others of the laboratory attendants, mostly unarmed, who all leapt back in obvious terror before the lethal wand that Roverton brandished in their faces.

The earth-men also encountered a sleepy-looking monster, like a sort of wingless dragon, which was probably a pet. It was lying stretched across the hall; and it gave a torpid and protesting bellow as they hurdled its spiny back and continued their flight.

The corridor, lit by unwavering rubescent flames, ran straight for an interminable distance, and then turned at a sharp angle. Through open doors, on either side, the fleeing earth-men caught outlandish glimpses of incomprehensible activities.

Again the corridor turned, at a reverse angle; and its ruddy flames were succeeded by the glaring mauve of daylight. Volmar and Roverton emerged on a narrow balcony as the everswelling swarm of their pursuers came in sight.

Before them again was the vast, bewildering vision of the white city, with its web of alabaster bridges woven gossamerwise between buildings that were alabaster mountains with multi-angled scarps and strange pinnacles. It was noon in this world, for the sun which they knew as an unnamed star in Serpens, poured down from a vertical elevation the cruel and tyrannic splendor of its super-tropic beams to illumine the vertigo-breeding depth of the chasmal streets below.

The balcony, or ledge, was barely seven feet in width, and like all others in this preternatural architecture, was void of walls or railings. Doubtless it circled the whole edifice; and at frequent intervals there were bridges which connected it with the balconies of other mamoth piles.

Blinded by the glare and shrinking from the dreadful gulfs, the men followed the ledge for some distance, but paused in consternation when a horde of dwarfs issued from a door-way just ahead. These beings, it was plain, had been sent to intercept them.

The first group of pursuers, which now numbered at least a score, was closing in from behind. There were no accessible doors or windows by which to re-enter the building; and the only means of continuing their flight was to cross one of those appalling bridges.

"Here goes," cried Roverton, panting, as he led the way along the slender span. The bridge was

unoccupied; but it seemed preferable that he, being armed, should go first in case of possible opposition.

It was a mad race. The men dared not slacken their speed, for their pursuers, two abreast, were crowding the bridge behind them like ants. The danger of being overtaken gave them an added coolness and poise, and they ran with flying leaps on a path where the least indecision or miscalculation would have plunged them into the abyss.

They were nearing the opposing pile, when three dwarfs armed with the paralyzing rods, emerged from a door in its cyclopean mass and ran forward to meet them on the bridge.

Holding his own weapon like a lance, Roverton faced these beings without hesitation. It was a perilous combat, for two of them were side by side, and he could dispose of only one at a time. He struck and parried with lightning agility; and the two, with yawning holes in their thoraxes from the impact of the fearsome igneous cone, went down in swift succession and hurtled into the half-mile chasm beneath. The third, however, had advanced within reach of Roverton, and thrust viciously with his rod.

Roverton dodged, and would have lost his footing as he teetered within an inch of the verge, if Volmar, standing close behind, had not put out an arm to steady him. Missing, the third dwarf ran headlong upon Roverton's weapon, which pierced him through till his body hung impaled on the ebon shaft. Roverton disengaged it, and kicked the falling corpse aside to join its companions in the gulf.

The earth-men reached the opposite building without further interruption; but their pursuers had gained appreciably during the combat and were dogging them closely as they plunged into the new edifice.

CHAPTER VI.

Pursuit.

THIS building, as far as they could tell, was wholly deserted; and it differed materially in its furnishings and apparent use from the one they had left. The unpeopled rooms into which they glanced as they hurried along a main hall, were panelled with fantastic paintings and designs that might have been astronomical maps. In some of them, there were huge globes and hemispheres of metal, and appliances like alien cosmospheres and planispheres.

An angle of the hall took the men temporarily beyond sight of their pursuers.

"Quick! let's find a hiding-place or a stairway," whispered Roverton.

They hesitated before a little door which gave on a dark chamber where the beams of the red fires in the hall were powerless to penetrate. Then, in an alcove, they perceived a flight of stairs.

Trusting that their pursuers would continue along the corridor, they began to ascend the stairs, taking three or four of the tiny steps at a leap. They would have preferred to descend, with the hope of eventually finding themselves on some sort of terra firma, but were deterred by an inexplicable noise, a metallic whirring and jarring, that suddenly started on the floors below. Above, there was utter silence.

"Haven't these people any elevator systems?" asked Roverton, after they had climbed steadily for several minutes. "It must take them all eternity to go up and down in their skyscrapers like this."

"There may be some other method of transit; though probably it wouldn't be of any use to us without special knowledge regarding its mechanism."

For hours, it seemed, the earth-men toiled from story to story of that interminable edifice. The sounds of pursuit had died out; and apparently the dwarfs were still seeking them on lower levels. They met no one in all that endless range of red-lit stairs and rooms.

All had grown silent, except for the subterranean rumblings from beneath the city, which became fainter as they went upward. They must have been in the heart of the building; and at no time did they approach the outer rooms and balconies or attain even a far-off glimpse of sunlight. They ceased to count the number of floors they had ascended, and it seemed to them that they were lost in some awful, topless tower of eternity and infinity. They marvelled at the mania for space and magnitude which must have prompted this tiny people to rear such colossal structures.

Their legs were turning to lead, and each step was like the heaving of a mighty weight. They gasped for breath within their aerated helmets, and heard the pounding of heavy pulses in their temples like the roar of driven torrents.

"Where are we going, anyway?" questioned Roverton, as they paused for a momentary respite. "And why are we going there? The end is a foregone conclusion, with all the cards that are stacked against us. There must be about a million deadly contingencies, I should think. We'll do well if we live long enough to exhaust our present supply of air."

"The air of this particular world might not be fatal to us," said Volmar. "We haven't sampled it yet, if you'll remember. Our dwarf friends were considerate enough, evidently, to re-fill our tanks with a chemical synthesis of the same air that they found in them."

"Well, I'd rather not try the local atmosphere till I have to. But what's the use of climbing any further? We've got the whole planet against us. Probably there are billions of these dwarfs with their devilish chemistry, all of them ready to hunt us down like wild beasts."

"Why worry about a little thing like that? Come on—there should be a good view from the top of this tower of Babel, when we get to it."

FOLLOWING the slow, tedious spiral of the stairs, at length they saw a gleam of purple daylight above them, and came out on the building's roof, where a single central spire continued to escalade the heavens. The flat roof itself was crowded with orb-like mechanisms that were perhaps used for the conservation of solar and stellar force. Crystal wheels and spheres were

turning silently within larger spheres of the same substance.

No one was in sight, and the roof was seemingly unoccupied. But several air-craft were approaching, and fearing to be seen by their occupants, the earth-men entered a door in the great spire. Here they found a staircase, and resumed their eternal climb.

At the top they emerged in a curious open cupola whose lofty dome was filled with large perforations. The place was lined with instruments that were doubtless astronomical. There were cosmolabes and armillaries designed for a universe not measured heretofore by man; there were strange double and triple mirrors of white mineral with surfaces of baffling convex angles; there were lenses arranged behind each other in curving, semi-circular frames, and adjusted to an unhuman vision. In the center of the alabastrine floor, the men perceived a sable disk, perhaps four feet in diameter, and depressed about six inches below the floor level. From the middle of the disk, and close together, there rose two upright rods.

At first they did not see that the cupola was occupied. Then, behind the litter of strange appliances, they perceived a wizened and aged-looking dwarf, bowed above a sort of dial on which were slanting rows of rubricated ciphers. He was unarmed, and did not hear the earth-men till they were close upon him. Then he turned and saw them.

Ungovernably startled, it would seem, by the apparition of beings who must have been supremely monstrous from his view-point he darted away from the dial and sprang toward the black disk. Roverton intercepted him, being dubious on general principles regarding the intention of his movement. Terrified by the glowing weapon which the earth-man waved in his face, the dwarf circled back among the crowded instruments and contrived to elude both Volmar and Roverton and win the head of the stairs. There he disappeared from their ken at breakneck speed.

"Too bad we didn't get that fellow," said Roverton. "I wasn't anxious to hurt him, but now he'll spread the good word among the others as to where we are hiding. The whole pack will be here presently, if not sooner."

"Well, let's take a look at the view anyway, being as we're here."

They stepped to the verge of the open cupola, which was supported on a circle of thin pillars, and looked out on a staggering scene. They could see the whole extent of the mighty city, which reached for many miles in every direction, lying below them at a depth which turned the people in its streets to microscopic motes. Around the city was a landscape of ineffable bizarrerie, with wide canals of blood-red water that intersected each other to form terraced isles, and then wound away through fields and forests of a vegetation whose coloring was more violent than that of futuristic paintings. Beyond it all, in sharp, airless outline on the violescent heavens, were horn-like mountains of jetty black and others of a whiteness more dazzling than the Pentelic marble.

"Golly," was Roverton's ejaculation. "The outlook is almost worth the climb. But I'd rather be seeing it from the *Alcyone*."

There came a confused babel of shrilling voices and a horde of dwarfs emerged on the roof below them and streamed toward the central spire.

"They couldn't have been so very far behind us, after all," Volmar commented. "And of course our friend the astronomer has told them how we invaded his observatory and dispossessed him."

Roverton was considering the various instruments in the cupola with an estimating eye. Some of them were set in the floor by means of metal bars and pivots, but many others were detached or loosely mounted. He picked up a singular object consisting of no less than seven concave lenses framed among rods and wires of a malachite-colored metal. It was satisfyingly heavy and would make an effective missile.

"We can hold the stairs while the ammunition lasts," he said.

VOLMAR was lifting a small armillary to try its weight. Between them, the men collected everything movable in a great pile at the stair-head. They had no sooner finished doing this, when the foremost of their pursuers came in sight. The winding steps were packed with these creatures, most of whom were furnished with anaesthetic rods, ignescent wands, or other odd weapons.

The men began to hurl their fantastic missiles at the throng—a barrage of metal orbs and mirrors, and queer-angled things which may have served the purpose of telescopes, eye-glasses, and spectroscopes. The front rows of assailants were driven back with crushed heads and broken limbs, and many were slain or paralyzed by their own weapons as they went down in a tangled mass that blocked the stairway.

In an orderly manner, seemingly unperturbed by all these casualties, the dwarfs proceeded to clear away their dead and wounded, and then came on as before. More were swept down by the remainder of the observatory's detachable paraphernalia; and much havoc in particular was inflicted by two armillaries which Volmar raised in his arms and sent crashing into the vanward files.

The supply of missiles was now exhausted; but Roverton still retained his death-dealing wand, and Volmar had reserved a sort of lens-apparatus which he intended to use as a mace when their attackers came within reach.

With the same hideous unhuman imperturbability, after halting long enough to remove the victims of that final barrage, the dwarfs resumed their advance, while the earth-men awaited them at the stair-head.

Roverton, quick-eared and alert, as he watched the thronging onset, was awart of an odd noise from behind, as if something had clashed lightly against the cupola. Turning, he perceived that an air-vessel, shaped somewhat in the fashion of a long, crescent-prowed barge, but without wings or any visible agency of levitation, had attached itself by coiling tendril-like chains to the cupola-

columns, and was discharging a dozen dwarfs into the observatory.

Roverton called Volmar's attention to the new danger.

"If you can hold the stairs, Captain, I'll tend to these customers," he said, and sprang to meet the invaders. These latter were furnished with weapons of a kind which the earth-men had not hitherto encountered—long, trumpet-like tubes, which they levelled immediately at Roverton. Their curling fingers played on certain knobs which studded the tubes, and from the mouth of each weapon there issued a jet of pearly vapor. All were aiming at Roverton's head, and he surmised that the vapor was some sort of deadly gas or anaesthetic. The goggles of his mask were blinded by the fumes, and he could see nothing as he groped among the strange paraphernalia in the dome.

Tripping against some unseen object, and trying to save himself from a fall, he lurched forward and stepped down with a terrific jar on the broad central disk that was set below the floor-level.

Clear of the pearly fumes, which still played overhead, he saw his assailants for an instant, crowding toward him with their weird weapons, as he clutched with his free hand at one of the upright rods which rose from the disk. Then he heard Volmar cry out, and turned his head toward the Captain, jerking the rod involuntarily as he did so. He saw in the merest flash of time that Volmar had fallen, and was half-hidden by the dwarfs who thronged about him from the stairs. Then the scene vanished, as if a black curtain had rushed upward upon it, and Roverton realized that the disk was dropping away beneath him with dizzy velocity in a long, dark shaft.

CHAPTER VII.

Trapped!

HE surmised that he was in a sort of elevator. The jerking of the rod as he steadied himself in turning toward Volmar had started its downward flight. The thing was falling like a plummet, and he clung to the rod to keep from striking the walls of the shaft.

Soon, in the darkness, there came a series of red flashes, almost merging with one another. These must indicate openings from the shaft into the various floors of the main building. Doubtless, by manipulating one or other of the rods, he could check or reverse his descent. For a moment, he thought of trying to do the latter. He would go back to the tower and die fighting beside the fallen Volmar. But Volmar was dead—and what was the use?

Heart-sick, lost, unutterably confused and bewildered, he felt a black weariness descend upon him like the clinging weight of some material thing. His remaining will was broken, his initiative was crushed beneath it.

With a dull fatalism, a leaden despair, he watched the red flashes. There must be hundreds of them, he thought. He was plunging down to a world whose actual soil neither he nor any other man had yet trodden; before the end came, he would perhaps attain a glimpse of maddening, insuperable mysteries, and would pierce a little further among the all-encompassing terrors and perils of a hostile planet. He resigned himself. He was not yet weaponless, for the lethal wand, with its green cone glowing brightly in the darkness, was still clutched in his right hand.

Abruptly, with no noise or jarring, the elevator came to a full stop. Roverton's limbs and body were inundated by a stream of saffron light which poured into the shaft through a low doorway. At the same time, his ears were assailed by a medley of rumbling sounds and deep metallic throbbings which appeared to come from all around him. He had the feeling that he was underground, that his descent had precipitated him from that topmost tower into the nether vaults of the colossal city.

Cautiously he stooped and squeezed himself through the opening, which afford ample passage for beings like the opalescent dwarfs but was rather scanty for a full-grown earth-man. Blinking in the saffron brilliance, he peered about him on a chamber so enormous, of such indeterminate scope that it seemed to partake of infinitude. It was filled with gigantic engines that appeared to use and combine every possible geometric form in their overbeetling bulks of dark stone and burnished metal.

The yellow light emanated from a sort of open vat or furnace in which was a glowing mass of molten substance. There were other flaming furnaces at intervals, and great red eyes that burned in many of the machines, pouring down a lurid effulgence.

From some of the mechanisms, huge, ramifying pipes went up and vanished in the darkness of a funnel-like dome. In the wildly flickering patches of light, and monstrous masses of shadow, Roverton saw dim, titanic figures, but did not realize at first that they were living beings. They were ten or twelve feet in height, and were strange and uncouth as the mechanisms which they tended. There were also two or three dwarfs, who appeared to be supervising their labors.

Roverton surmised that he had stumbled into a power-plant of some unknown kind. The giants, mayhap, were members of a subject people enslaved by the dwarfs and compelled to toil in their subterranean vaults.

The nearest furnace, watched by a single giant, was fifty feet away, and its warder had his back to Roverton. Hoping to escape observation in the vastness and gloom of the chamber, the earth-man started to make his way toward certain of the towering mechanisms that were dark and seemingly untended. He had no idea where he was going or what he would find; and he had reached the exhaustion point, both physically and mentally.

The drug injected by the dwarfs seemed to be dying out in his veins, and he tottered with an intermittent weakness. Also, he was stunned by the loss of Volmar, his Captain and comrade. His brain, his senses, his muscles, were no longer functioning normally. It did not even occur to

him that he might have stayed in the elevator shaft and found his way back to some other level where escape would not offer so many hazards.

He had nearly reached the shadow of a huge pyramidal mechanism, when one of the giants saw him and started in pursuit. The creature came on with lumbering, elephantine paces, and looking back as he fled, Roverton saw its face for the first time in the lurid furnace-glare. The thing was a biological nightmare, with one swollen, blazing, sulphur-yellow eye where the mouth would be in a human face, and all the rest a mass of writhing, viperish tentacles around a central slit. The limbs and body were no less monstrous than the face.

Roverton ran, in an access of horror-stimulated strength; and doubling in and out among the dark machines, he contrived to throw his clumsy pursuer off the track. But there were harsh roarings, audible above the noise of the engines, which indicated that others were joining in the chase. Also, he heard the shrill, sweet sibilation of one of the supervising dwarfs.

LUCKILY, this part of the chamber was untenanted. He ran madly, interminably in the semi-darkness, and came at last to the chamber's end. Here he discovered a dimly yawning exit, and plunged headlong through it on an inclined plane, going downward at an angle of twenty degrees. The plane led to another vault, deserted and perhaps disused, where he would have found himself in utter darkness if it had not been for the glowing wand which he still carried. By its weird light, he saw the looming bulks of other massive engineries.

Hastening on between rows of these mechanisms, he heard the roar of pursuit and saw the red flare of moving lights behind him in the gloom. He fled on through an eternity of cyclopean metal cones and cylinders, of black retorts and flameless furnaces, and reached another exit. This led into what was plainly a natural cavern, with rough nodular walls in which he caught the glistening of pale, mercurial ores.

The cavern turned and twisted like a serpent, and soon began to narrow. Its floor and sides were damp with drippings, were mottled with a soft, cozy marl. His feet slipped in puddles from which loathly creatures, half-batrachian, half-insect, writhed and wriggled in sluggish alarm to avoid his feet.

With dimming senses and failing muscles, he still went on. His mind was becoming a partial blank: he had almost forgotten everything that had happened, and the horror of it all was a vague amorphous blur. Even his own identity was doubtful as a half-remembered dream. He was only a dying atom of consciousness, lost in a monstrous world without meaning or reason, without boundary or end.

Slowly, obscurely, he perceived that something was retarding his progress. Long, whitish ropes and tendrils were hanging in a curtain from the cavern-roof; and he had blundered into them without seeing. What they were he could not imagine. His brain grouped for analogies, for similes that he could not recall.

The ropes and tendrils seemed to be twining about him, growing over him, enmeshing him from head to foot like a web of whip-snakes; and some of them recoiled and twisted with an undulating motion at the touch of the fiery-headed wand in his hand.

Roverton fought instinctively to free himself, in a nightmare of dim terror and exhaustion. He swayed back and forth but the ropy meshes held tenaciously. He sank into a half-swoon, and the wand fell from his fingers; but he himself did not fall, but was supported by the clinging growths. What these were he never knew; but doubtless they belonged to some type of organism mid-way between the vegetable and animal kingdoms.

He heard voices, and saw a flash of light on the pale, hundred-stranded web that held him. With a start of returning consciousness, he knew that his pursuers had found him. But it did not seem to matter greatly. Nothing mattered, now that he had lost Volmar and had gone astray in the clueless labyrinth of a dark infinity.

CHAPTER VIII.

Into Space

ROVERTON'S memories of what followed were partial and fragmentary. There were starts of full awareness during a period of semi-oblivion, in which he realized that he was being carried by the boa-thick arms of one of the giant laborers who had pursued him. By flashes of sullen, lurching light, he saw the unthinkable face of this creature above him, and saw the indistinct bulks of the subterranean mechanisms.

He seemed to go on for aeons in some underground avenue, cradled by an ever-swaying movement that lulled him to troubled drowiness. Then, all at once, though he knew not how nor where, he was going upward in a great abyss of darkness toward some far-off, watching eye of light, and metal chains were about him in lieu of the giant arms. He closed his lids to avert a feeling of dizziness. Then, after a little, his swoon became complete; and he saw no more till he opened his eyes in a glaring radiance.

For awhile he could recall nothing of all that had happened to him, could understand nothing on which he gazed. His eyes were half-blinded by a pitiless light, were assailed and stabbed by stupendous imageries. He seemed to be looking down into a violet-purple gulf, in which hung the inverted alabaster walls and portals and towers of a gigantic architecture; and he himself was suspended, as if by some reverse gravitation, from the bottom of this topsy-turvy world.

Then, all at once, he had the feeling that he was not alone. Turning his head with a great effort, he found to his incredulous amazement that Volmar, bound with thick leathery looking cords to pegs in a metallic surface, was hanging beside him.

Whether Volmar was dead or alive, he could not yet know. The closed lids beneath the goggles of the Captain's mask were wan and still as marble. But Roverton felt a joyous surprise that they were together again, and the emotion served

to revive him and clarify his muddled faculties. Yet he feared to speak, lest Volmar should not answer him.

There was an instant of uncanny *bouleversement*, while all about him seemed to whirl and circle like a mighty wheel. Then he knew that he was lying on his back and was staring up at the heavens between the buildings of that city to which he and Volmar had been conveyed in the alien ether-ship.

He tried to sit up, and discovered that he also was bound by means of leathery cords to the metal surface. His head alone was free, and twisting as far as he could, he saw that the Captain and himself were in the center of a wide street or square, with the people of the city standing about them in a solemn, silent crowd. The men were tied to something that appeared to be a sort of platform. Its area was indefinite, but it could not have risen more than a foot above the street-level.

Roverton felt the enigmatic gaze of the nacre-colored dwarfs, who were all looking on in absolute stillness. Beyond their crowding heads, beyond the myriad structures, at the end of an almost infinite avenue, he beheld a sinking sun that had nearly touched the horizon and was tinging the white towers with supernal rose and amethyst.

What was to happen, he wondered? Were he and Volmar destined as a sacrifice to some ultra-sidereal deity? Were they to be the victims of some occult, unknowable scientific experiment? The silence of the throng about them was laden with a meaning which he could not apprehend, and was ominous with unreadable secrets of a trans-cosmic psychology. He knew nothing, never would know anything, of this incomprehensible race.

The dead, utter silence was broken by a loud click, followed by a whirring sound as of some metal wheel or spring. The world beneath Roverton seemed to quiver and surge, the staring faces disappeared from his vision, and he saw that the thing to which Volmar and himself had been bound was rising rapidly in air among the fantastic bridges and structures of the white city.

Balconies rushed by him, he caught flying glimpses of the dwarf people who were passing to and fro on slender spans. Then he was level with the roofs and towers, and as these fell away beneath him, he had once more that horrible sensation of hanging downward, and felt that he was sinking into some unfathomable gulf. About him now there was nothing but empty space.

"WHERE are we?" A feeble voice had spoken at his side.

"Are you really alive?" cried Roverton, as he turned toward Volmar and saw that the pale eyelids had opened.

"Apparently we're both alive, incredible as the fact may be. But that isn't answering my question as to where we are."

"As far as I can tell, we are on some sort of anti-gravitational raft and are headed for outer space. Our hosts, it would seem, have definitely decided that you and I are undesirable aliens in their world . . . . But what happened to you in the tower? The last I saw, you had fallen; and I thought surely you were dead."

"I've certainly been dead to the particular planet which you say we are quitting. Those fellows started throwing their anaesthetic rods at me, while you were fighting the crew from the air-ship. One of them got me with the business-end—and that is the whole story as far as I am concerned. I suppose yours is about the same."

Roverton gave the Captain a brief outline of his own adventures, as well as he could recollect them.

"Then there was an elevator," said Volmar. "I wondered about that black disk the astronomer was in such a hurry to reach."

"It's a wonder they didn't kill us outright, considering all the damage we inflicted," was Roverton's comment after a minute of silence. "Maybe they didn't mean to hurt us at all, in the beginning."

"Yes," said Volmar sadly, "we may have misunderstood them. Certainly that can happen all too easily, between members of such wholly divergent races, who have no medium of communication and, in all likelihood, no ideas or motivations in common."

Their ascent had continued at an undiminished rate. Though they were soaring into full sunlight, the sky had darkened rapidly and was taking on the ebon of ultra-atmospheric space. Stars were visible everywhere. They must be penetrating the planet's envelope of air; and they would soon reach the interstellar ether. The warmth of the world below had given place to a boreal cold that made itself felt through their insulated clothing.

"Well, I guess this is the end," said Volmar. "You and I will continue our spatial voyage indefinitely—but we won't be in a condition to know anything about it. A few more minutes and we will freeze so stiff that we could be broken into powder with a hammer. Then we will drift on in space, among the whirling suns and systems, and perhaps afford a third-rate meteor for some world whose gravitational influence is strong enough to attract the mechanism on which we are bound."

"Yes, I suppose it's the end. Well, good-bye Captain."

"Good-bye, Roverton."

The cold stung like a million needles, then the stinging became blunted and both men began to feel drowsy. They would have fought the drowsiness, but there seemed to be no use in prolonging their period of suffering. Numbly, somnolently, they resigned themselves to the inevitable Lethe and closed their eyes on the black circle of space with its myriad suns.

A far-off thrumming, faint as with the gulfs of incomputable distance, but mechanically persistent, seemed to draw them back from the deadly depth into which they were sinking.

They opened their eyes. A long, shining bulk was poising above them in the heavens. It was the *Alcyone*! They rose toward it, they saw it veer and dip and soar again to keep pace with their ascent. It came close, it paralleled their

(*Concluded on Page 569*)

The Great Invasion

By **Sidney Patzer**

(*Illustration by Marchioni*)

He expected to see lines of soldiers manipulating huge guns. But the field into which he strode was deserted except for two figures who approached him.

EARLY in the fall of 1943, the inhabitants of Cleveland and Akron had seen in the night three glowing, meteor-like bodies falling with a "whush!" in tremendous speed toward the earth. No one thought of the lights as a menace for it was a season of falling stars.

Passengers on the "owl" interurbans from either city, at the point where the cars slowed down to pass each other, noticed with mild surprise that, nearly a mile to the west of the tracks, three huge zeppelins, white and enormous in the darkness surrounding them, had moored in the open fields. Their surprise was not great, however, because in that region where they were made, the world's largest airships created no astonishment.

The first alarm was given the next morning. The motorman of an interurban from Cleveland, in the first dawn of a new day, noticed that the car tracks before him did not stretch in a straight line, but were cracked and strangely warped, as if some great heat had distorted them. From them came an odd sparkling, and he was astonished to see the overhead power-line glow white-hot and snap into the air a hundred yards before him.

When, power off, his car came to a halt, the motorman jumped down with an inarticulate cry and walked a short distance forward. He received an impression of buoyancy and intense heat, and recoiled from it.

At the same time the two power houses saw that there had been a break in the line, and automatically traced it to a point almost midway between the two cities. After a fruitless wait at the telephone, an operator informed them that no messages were getting through, and when the call was finally rerouted the puzzled officials knew no more than they had before. There was something wrong. What it was they did not know.

Two trucks of trouble-shooters set out simultaneously to locate the disturbance, but returned within the hour to report that they could do nothing. They described as best they could the immense havoc wrought by an agency which was to them unknown. The heat, not allowing a close inspection of the damage, was tremendous. It was like the fusing of impalpable material, the air green but transparent, and nobody could venture into the stricken area. The greenness of it became fully evident at night, when the entire countryside was bathed in a sickly, emerald light over a radius of perhaps five miles. Nothing could penetrate it, but nothing came out of it.

Within this protective screen, no living thing moved. It was as if the green were a deadly poison, and not even a stunted tree or a fallen farmhouse could be seen from outside. Only the undying earth remained, barren of life. Even the undulating hills seemed flattened and rolling, like a waterless desert.

The afternoon papers carried short, incomplete accounts of an occurrence that had disrupted traffic between the cities, but gave it no special importance. Traffic would be resumed, they said, shortly.

At the request of the city of Cleveland, the government took a hand at once, and sent a detachment of the National Guard from their armory near Lake Erie. These troops simply patrolled the vicinity, to keep the curious away from the ring of desolation. The government, not knowing what it had to contend with, worked slowly and cautiously.

It was thought that some intensely radioactive substance had dropped from the sky. The full truth did not come out until later, although the first theory was discredited when the story of the supposed zeppelins was brought forward. There were no United States airships closer than Philadelphia on that first night.

Exploration from the air gave little information. Two planes, swooping low, were caught in a flash of fire and plunged to their death, and others, returning, were able to agree on only one point: that, in the very center of the disturbance, there were three enormous masses of metal, long, and apparently of the same design. From five

SIDNEY PATZER

IF Martian creatures were ever to invade the earth, the reason for it would be quite obvious—self preservation. For living things, constituted on the same order as terrestrial life, existence on Mars must be indeed precarious. The extremes of temperature, the tenuity of the air and the lack of water are conditions that would kill all but the most hardy of life forms. Compared to life on Mars, existence on most parts of the earth is quite luxurious.

But an invasion of the earth and an attempt to conquer our planet of two billions of people, would require military skill or scientific implements of the highest order. It would require quick adaptation to terrestrial conditions, and a profound knowledge of the psychology of human beings. But granting that an invader possessed these things, he might, as our author shows in this interesting story, pursue a startling program of conquest whose secret we would not guess until it was too late!

miles up the observers could see very little, and photographs showed nothing whatever.

Was it war? The Secretary of State was instructed to discover as quickly as possible, but carefully worded cablegrams sent to every power on the globe elicited negative replies. No country knew of an attack on the United States.

Still the government made no offensive move. Infantry, artillery and tank corps came ceaselessly into Cleveland, and deployed in a ring of steel. No sign of life came from the besieged area. Perhaps there was no life in that circle. The green light, never waning, protected its secret from a thousand prying eyes.

AFTER the first week, the Invaders were evidently ready. At two o'clock in the morning, Sunday, three blinding beams of red shot from the circle's center, and an army died in its sleep. The range of this new weapon was just twice that of the cloaking, light-green protective screen that covered the encampment. Twisted guns and mounds of metal that had once been tanks were all that was left of the lives and equipment of 20,000 men.

This, then, was war, and war to the death. There had been no parleying, no warning, only the red beams of silent and instant annihilation. No living thing could stand in their path; life shriveled and disappeared in their glare.

A continent sprang into war-like activity. Miles back from the Invaders huge trenches were dug, heading always inward. Night and day the digging was continued, and no man reared his head above the topmost walls. Long range guns were installed, in excavations below the surface of the earth.

A hundred thousand soldiers gathered in the vicinity and entrenched themselves just outside the green light. The earth was honeycombed with trenches, and the wealth of a great nation poured in upon its defenses. Tunnels further forward were found to be useless: no man could stand the heat in them. Death lurked straight ahead.

For over a month, the rumble of big guns shook northern Ohio, but their shells were seemingly unable to penetrate the protective screen: they burst long before they had reached their target. Bombs, dropped from the skies, exploded in mid-air. Even gas was dissolved and dissipated far from its objective.

The red beams, deadly but now unharming, glowed into the surrounding territory at certain unpredictable intervals. Once several hooded, uniformed figures approached the outer edges of their self-made prison: they were strangely small, and upright, like men, and they walked as if they had no joints in their legs. They examined for a time the fortification which surrounded them, then disappeared again.

The next day the Invaders made a short sally, carrying themselves forward behind silvery shields, but they were quickly bombed out of existence. They had carried small, red-beam projectors, but volunteers were unable to find traces of them or their bodies. They seemed to have disappeared as surely and certainly as if, before they died, they had turned their beams upon themselves. After this, there was no more direct action.

For two months the war continued as a stalemate. Neither side could penetrate the defenses of the other, or, if the Invaders could, they did not do so. The American army was powerless to advance, but waited.

One day the identity of the Invaders was established beyond question through a brilliant inference made by the astronomer, Rutledge, of California Polytechnic. After a careful study of the red beams' projection times through several weeks, he announced the probable times when they could be expected in the future. His calculation were exact to the second. He explained that the red ray flashed during the first few minutes of the appearance of the planet Mars on the eastern horizon, without fail. His theory was that the invaders were signalling through space to their home. Knowing when it was safe to be above ground, the troops were more at their ease.

The situation remained unchanged. At the end of the seventh week there was one new development. For half an hour every day, powerful radio disturbances shot skyward from the Martian camp. They were so strong that all wireless communication in the middle west had to be discontinued during their broadcast.

The signals were caught all over the world, but no philologist could get the key to their translation. Were the Martians crying for help through the ether, or were they giving advice and direction for another expedition against the earth? The world came out of its inertia long enough to wonder, and then promptly again forgot. Business went on as usual. The newspaper despatches were reassuring: no news was good news.

A Discovery!

"YOU see that line of white posts up there?" pointed Sergeant Timothy McCarthy.

It was night, but the whole countryside was lighted up by a huge, diaphanous cup of shining, iridescent green. Private Jack Waldon had no difficulty in making out the line of posts.

"Yes," he said.

"Well," said the sergeant, "if you value your life, stay on this side of them."

Waldon stared forward into the unnatural glow.

"So that's the stuff, is it?" he said to himself.

"Yep, that's it," McCarthy declared.

This was Waldon's first visit to what had become known as the "circle," but, like everyone else in the civilized world, he knew in a fair way what it meant. He was ready to help in its extermination.

"Three minutes. Get back where you belong."

Each man jumped into the first trench, and Waldon hesitated.

"Time for the red stuff?"

The sergeant nodded.

"Run," he said. "Straight back there."

"But what about you?"

"I belong here. I'm all right. Get on!"

Waldon knew a command when he heard one. He dived into a dugout in the third line trenches

before the red beams stabbed half-way to the horizon. In five minutes, when the red light had flickered out, he with seven other men and another squad were told to go forward. It was to be their night on active duty.

What Waldon didn't know, and what Lieutenant Matson, who sent him, didn't know, was that for the first time in six weeks something had gone wrong with the green protective screen of the Invaders: when the red had played through it that night, it bulged outward fully five hundred yards. So that when Waldon came to the first line trench, he found it deserted. Throughout the length of it there was no trace of a living man, no trace except small equally distant mounds of silvery dust. Two men were hastily despatched to report the catastrophe.

Waldon, peering nervously ahead, walked slowly to the spot where he had last seen Sergeant McCarthy. He found only a heap of powder where, five minutes before, a living man had stood. As he poked about, idly and in mounting anger, he felt something solid. Stooping over, he picked up the only piece of clothing or equipment that had escaped destruction, Sergeant McCarthy's mica watch crystal.

He stared at it a moment, then slipped it absent-mindedly into his jacket pocket. He shook his fist at the Enemy, muttering: he had known McCarthy only a few short minutes, but now he missed him. "Even if he was a sergeant," he smiled, grimly, to himself.

Orders were given, as a security measure, that the men were to retreat to the third line. The night continued uneventful after that.

In the early morning, like a flash, it came to Waldon. He started forward, then stopped to think. Had he made a discovery? He thought he had. But if the green screen did not affect mica, why hadn't that been found out before? Of course it was true that, for many weeks, no man had ventured near it. . . . Walton bounded to his feet.

In his excitement, he did not wait on ceremony. Lieutenant Matson was interrupted in mid-sentence by a husky young private who burst wildly into his dugout.

"I've got it!" Waldon shouted.

Two men jumped on him from either side, and pinned his arms to his body.

"Easy, buddy, easy," Matson said.

Waldon understood, and relaxed at once.

"What's the trouble?" the lieutenant asked. He was new at his post, but he was a kindly man.

"I've got a way to get rid of that green stuff."

Matson looked at him sympathetically.

"One of your friends up front last night?"

"Yes," Waldon replied. He stopped in thought a few seconds. "I'm not crazy, sir, but my idea carried me away."

"Well?"

"I was poking around in all that was left of Sergeant McCarthy," Waldon explained. "He was nothing but dust, except for one thing. His watch crystal wasn't even burnt. It was all in one piece."

"What!" cried Matson suddenly. "Good God! You mean to say it wasn't dissolved at all?"

"No, sir," Waldon declared. He began to step forward, then smiled. "If you would tell these gorillas. . . ." he began.

"Sure," the lieutenant agreed. "That's right." Turning to the aides who were holding the private, he nodded his head, and Waldon was released.

HE fished in his pocket and drew out a convex bit of mica.

"Here," he said.

Lieutenant Matson stared at it for a long time, turning it in his fingers, examining it closely. There was no sign of its having come into contact with the green heat.

"That's a paradox for you," Matson declared. "Nobody would believe such a thing. Mica can't stand heat. . . . It's unnatural. Mica is a metal, and fuses like everything else."

He handed the crystal to Waldon, and scribbled a hasty note.

"Take this and the private to Major Appleton. I can't do anything more about it."

"Yes, sir." A sergeant saluted and left, Waldon at his heels.

There was immense activity in the offices of the War Department that day. Although few believed in the efficacy of what they were planning to do, forty-eight hours later five mica suits appeared at the front, and volunteers were called upon to wear them into the danger zone. Waldon and four others were chosen. The suits were made in two sections: the upper part, going over the head and oxygen tank, descended to the waist, where an ingenious arrangement of clasps held it tightly to the body.

As the five men walked into no-man's land, Waldon's heart pounded violently. His covering was so transparent that he seemed open, unprotected. They walked into the green light warily and hesitatingly, but nothing happened, and they continued on for perhaps half a mile, Waldon in the lead. They were not harmed, and felt no heat.

Just as they were about to turn back, their mission completed, the five men noticed a lurid glare behind them. Turning swiftly, they saw that their retreat was cut off: a wave of red had somehow come over them and descended beyond them, and they were unable to rejoin their fellows. Panic-stricken, three men plunged into the crackling mist, to dissolve at once into original substance. The fourth wavered, stumbled, and fell back with a cry that was cut short by instant death.

Of the five, only Waldon remained. He stood rooted to the spot, expecting every breath to be his last. When nothing happened to him, however, he took heart: he could not go back, obviously enough, so he went forward. He had seen and appreciated what had happened to his comrades. "That red stuff isn't healthy," he remarked, smiling slightly at his own understatement.

Now and again he hesitated, and once he turned to make sure that the red had not disappeared, but when he discovered that the curtain kept pace with his advance, he resolutely faced forward and was lost to sight behind the huge metal bulwarks of the Enemy.

What Waldon had expected to see was problematical. McNeely, of the North American Newspaper Syndicate, had published an immensely popular cartoon with the first coming of the Martians, showing them as weak, spindly creatures as large as horses, with heads almost as big as their bodies, and, for some reason best known to himself, with three eyes, one at the back. Waldon doubted that he would see anything quite like that, but he saw his first Martian with a mixture of emotions. He felt somehow vaguely cheated that they looked so human.

In the first place, he had expected a great deal of scurry and confusion, but there was none of that. Also, he expected to see lines of soldiers manipulating huge guns of some sort, but the huge, triangular-shaped field into which he strode was deserted except for two figures who approached him.

He looked, and he wouldn't have been surprised to see even bugs or reptiles, but in reality two tiny, man-like creatures approached him. They were finely proportioned beings, one less tall than the other, and they gave an impression of great strength and confidence. Although they wore a complicated set of braces on their legs, and both were clothed in strange, leathery fabrics that covered them entirely except for their heads, their form and features at first seemed surprisingly familiar. It was only after the first startled scrutiny that Waldon began to notice a strange, other-worldly appearance about them.

Their strangeness became more and more apparent as the Earthman stared. Scarcely two feet high, they had seemed condensed humans, but as Waldon began unconsciously to measure himself with them, wondering whether to stamp on them or kick them from his path, he was baffled by an impression of suppleness and fluidity in the Martians' bodies, a bulging and receding of arms and legs, a rippling of the face, a certain continuous crawling and squirming.

A Martian Education

THE smaller, a tiny, unnatural woman, began talking to him, and when she opened her mouth, he now fully expected that she would talk in English, or at least some language familiar to him. He listened closely, but could make nothing of the clear, whining syllables that came to him. Because of the rising inflection of her voice, he supposed that he had been asked a question, but he understood nothing. He noticed only that there was sibilance in her speech. As she spoke, her features seemed gradually to change, as if fluid: momentarily they darkened, the nose lengthened, shortened, the mouth widened, became smaller.

He shook his head to show that he did not understand, and then, unwillingly, dredged into his mind and repeated the first line of the Iliad, where it had lain since his days of college Greek: in this first line there are no hissing "s" sounds.

The Martians exchanged glances, but evidently failed to understand what he had said. The woman, however, pointed at Waldon and made a motion toward one of the metal hulls, a towering, metallic craft that had come through 40,000,000 miles of empty space, and he crossed to it, and entered. What they wanted with him he didn't know, but he had lost any sense of immediate fear.

They came, finally, to a small room, in which were two small metal benches: Waldon sat on one, and the woman on the other, as the other Martian withdrew. He had vanished so rapidly that he had seemed to explode into thin air, but there was the slightest rasp of steel against steel, to show that he was walking away.

"Ulla," the dwarf said, pointing to herself.

"Jack," he replied, feeling exceedingly foolish. "Jack Waldon."

"Aalwoon," Ulla said, pointing to the bench on which she sat.

"Bench," retorted Waldon.

If this was education, Waldon felt that he might as well make the best of it, but he felt very silly about it.

Ulla's perception and quickness was something remarkable: she forgot nothing that he said to her, and all day long a stream of objects was brought forward for Waldon to identify. He could remember less than a tenth of what was said to him, but the Martian's memory lost nothing. Once, when she brought forth a box-like contrivance the like of which he had never seen, Waldon took his courage in his two hands and leaned over to look at her. He was continuously astounded by the lack of rigidity in the Martian's features. It looked as if he were seeing the reflection of a face in a waving and undulating three-dimensional mirror.

She drew back then, as if in fear, and her roving, inquisitive eyes became blank and staring, and sprouted forward, while a glow played over Waldon's head and body. There was a snap, as of a switch, and immediately the eyes receded, became normal, and the mobile, everchanging face, waterlike, turned and swirled. At the same time Waldon became so sleepy that he could not keep his eyes open, and in a moment he fell into a slumber that was by no means dreamless.

Until the moment he felt entirely awake again, he had the continuous, uneasy impression that his catechism was going right on whether he slept or not, although how he managed to see and identify stuff brought to him he couldn't say. When he received food, he gave names for everything he ate, and before he unexpectedly fell asleep again he was certain that he was under some form of hypnosis.

Once he awoke out of a silence just long enough to notice that Ulla was staring at him curiously and a bit sardonically, and he felt an odd fear before he drowsed off again.

He had remembrances of distending black cubes, living on their own distending, and a half-formed picture of a soundless crash in space, in which two space-ships struck a floating, malignant island suspended in ether. He didn't know till much later how much of this unreality was truth.

From all this vagueness and nightmare, Waldon had two clearcut memories. He had said angrily, "You little people can never take the Earth. You're too little."

Ulla had not replied, but had certainly under-

stood. He had no sooner stopped talking than the Martian distended visibly, broadening outward, seemed to billow slightly, and grew upward fully four feet. And when she stopped her growth she seemed even solider, heavier, than before.

And another time Waldon had said, also in a moment of anger:

"You're monsters. You have no hearts."

Ulla then replied, seemingly in English:

"That's interesting. You're poorly made, as far as I can make out. You have your lungs all in one place, and you have to have an organ to pump your blood over you. Like yourselves, we need air to live, but we certainly don't need very much. We breathe as you do, only our lungs are all over, with a larger lung, for bellows, near our mouths. We breathe through our pores: we have to, on our planet, to get enough air to keep going. You're the monsters, as far as I'm concerned, although I can see that for your environment it's well enough."

FINALLY the questioning of him was ended: he did not knowhow long it had lasted, but he was sure that any information he might have had he had passed on, unwittingly, to the Martians. His fears on this point were confirmed almost at once. His brain had been probed and understood while he slept.

Ulla spoke to him, and he was surprised to discover that he knew what she was talking about: there were gaps in his knowledge of her language, but he understood nearly everything that had an earthly significance. His face blanched when he heard, coldly and distinctly, from Ulla's writhing lips, the Martians' original plan for the conquest of the world: her expedition had been only a preparatory one, a feeling tentacle to learn the richness, power and liveableness of the earth, and a hundred million Martians were even then prepared to swoop down upon the world and lay it waste.

Ulla watched him closely as she talked, and she was seemingly satisfied with what she saw in him. When she left him alone to his thoughts, she flashed him a sadly malicious smile.

Waldon wrestled with his conscience. Couldn't he do something, anything, to avert the slaughter that was to come? He could see no hope. What could he do, single-handed, against a power that could destroy armies at no danger to itself? Waldon was afraid, not only for himself, but also for his race. It was no longer death he feared, but the extermination of human life on earth.

He had no plan, but when the tiny Martian reappeared, with sudden resolution, he sprang toward her: he might at least do some damage to the enemy's machinery before he would be overpowered. Even as he leaped, however, Ulla's eyes sprouted outward like terrible snakes, and touched him lightly on the chest. Waldon crumpled helpless to the ground: he had felt no hurt, but he lay stunned. The Martian looked at him unpityingly for a moment, one eye feeling his face as she did so, and Waldon came slowly to his feet.

Then she said to him in English, coolly and imperatively:

"Come!"

She put a helmet over her head, while Waldon adjusted the mica, and the two stepped out into the empty clearing among the space-ships.

* * * *

The death of the four men and Waldon's capture was a blow hard to take, but no sooner had the news of the repulse been confirmed than a ray of hope was seen through it. To use their red beam *within* the radius of the green screen, the Martians had to remove the screen: evidently the two could not be used simultaneously in the same place. The Martians were not invulnerable.

Now there was something to work on, and the army seethed in unaccustomed activity. Preparations were begun for a great offensive. Hundreds of mica-covered tanks were prepared, swift little monsters, directed by radio, capable of 60 miles an hour on the level: they were walking torpedoes, and their extermination would cost money, but no lives.

At the same time the greatest concentration of artillery the world had ever seen grouped around the center, and the entire air force was called to five neighboring states. They swarmed from every corner of the country in thousands, ready for the call. The plan was to send the tanks forward in a hurrying zigzag, and when the screen was withdrawn to let the blasting red rays come into play, to level them off with heavy artillery fire.

The first attack was made at ten o'clock at night. From the moment that the first tank entered the protective screen, the big guns began their pounding: the earth shook with their reverberations. This was nothing new to the Martians: they drew their screen inward before the tanks, and destroyed them when they were free of the green radiance. Orders were given immediately to stop the attack: no tank that had gone forward came back, but no lives were lost. A change in tactics was advisable.

Troops encased in mica dug trenches, deep and penetrating, farther inward. Half a mile from their objective, they had to stop; spurts of red flame, from high on the metallic masses in front of them, stopped their further advance. From this distance, however, powerful catapults were brought into action, and mica-covered bombs were hurled toward the Enemy. The guns kept at their steady hammering: no damage was done, but any lowering of the green curtain would be exceedingly dangerous.

The Martians were fighting as they had not fought before: they kept their screen in the main intact, but made holes through it to catch and destroy the bombs hurled at them, to annihilate the tanks moving toward them. They opened an instantaneous slit in their armor, so to speak, shot through it, and closed it up at once. It was all done so quickly that only the very luckiest shell could expect to crash through. For six whole days an incessant barrage fell over the Martians, and not a hit was scored.

The Ultimatum!

AT the end of this time the Enemy brought into play another weapon, one which they must have known long before, but which they did not consider deadly enough to use: they began throwing out large, heavy shells, followed by small crackling grenades that burst into shrapnel. Any piercing of the army's mica meant sudden death, and casualties were frequent. The situation was critical for both sides: if the shutters of the Martian offense failed to click shut at just the right moments, rapidly traveling explosives would shriek down upon them. There were two detonations from within the Martian camp on the seventh day, but no one knew what caused them.

Then, as if tired of their own tactics, the Martians diffused their red beam through and beyond their screen, and extended it to the outermost limits: behind that their green flowed, until the red remained only a thin and unpierceable shell around the whole. That too extended, until it was like a great bowl over the Martian camp. Orders came at once to fall back: the Martians now again had the whiphand, because anything that came into view inside that circle of death was instantly destroyed. The mica was protection only again the green, and there was no green within the far-flung, inverted cup.

One plan was made and immediately discarded, to bring guns underground to the front. From the embattled Martians came wave after wave of green and red light, never touching, but following one another with monotonous and ominous regularity. As the situation stood, nothing could get through. What could stand up in the green would be destroyed by the red. This was a check that seemed as final as the green alone had at first seemed final. The troops waited, a little fearfully: they could remain unprotected, but they could not attack.

For ten hours all effort ceased. The guns were silent, the troops steeped in lethargy. And for the first time in days, no radio signals came from the Martian camp.

* * * *

Observers suddenly straightened up as they peered into their trench periscopes. Something was moving in the dusk of no-man's land. They finally distinguished two figures moving toward the earthmen's embankments: one, very small, closely hooded, walked stiffly, and strangely upright, like a man; the other was a human being. The red rays disappeared before them and reappeared behind. There was no hesitation in that slow, deliberate advance. That Waldon was one of them, nobody now doubted.

When they arrived at the first-line trenches, a hundred rifles were covering them, but the order had gone up not to shoot. A sergeant rose to meet the figures, his bayonet fixed. Like everyone else, he was encased in his suit of mica.

Waldon smiled at the sergeant, and remarked:

"You'd better take us to the old man. The Martians want to talk it over."

The sergeant nodded, and asked curiously:

"What are they like?"

"Little," Waldon replied. "But they know their stuff."

The soldier preceded him down lengths of trenches, while a thousand amazed eyes stared at the Invader who had come millions of miles through space. Waldon did not speak, although he could hear and be heard perfectly well through the mica.

They came to General Green's dugout, after both Major Appleton and a colonel, unknown to Waldon, had ordered them straight to headquarters. What was at stake was certainly too important for any subordinate's meditation. For the first time the Martians were going to give their terms. Perhaps they were to sue for peace. At least a truce was probable.

The general was ready for them: word of their coming had preceded them. The chief of staff gazed with intense curiosity at the tiny hooded creature before him, which returned the glance with a scrutiny of its own. Finally, satisfied, the semi-transparent hood was drawn back, and the figure spoke. She spoke in a language that no man present but Waldon could understand, and General Green looked interrogatively at him.

"She's telling you what she has been telling me ever since they got me, sir," Waldon translated. "A hundred million Martians are ready to invade the earth, and they have a quarter of a million space-ships ready."

"Well?" the general asked.

When Waldon turned to Ulla, waiting for her to continue, he noticed again a strangely sardonic gleam in her eye, as she turned her otherwise impassive countenance up in his direction.

He waited until she finished.

"She says that it has never been their intention to conquer or overrun the earth, but that they find life on Mars too much of a struggle; they haven't enough water, enough air. She says she comes now for peace. She says she is perfectly willing to sign a truce. What she wants is any territory on this earth, relatively free from human beings, where she can settle. She says only that it must be big enough to support a large population. She doesn't care where it is.

"She says that those are her only terms: a place on earth on which to rebuild a Martian civilization, in peace and security."

General Green rubbed the side of his face.

"Otherwise?" he asked.

"Otherwise," said Ulla seriously, "we must take what we are not given. We can not live much longer on Mars!"

THE ultimatum was despatched to the president of the United States for communication to the world powers. It was up to him to decide a question new in the annals of world history.

Waldon, after a short grilling by the general, was sent as envoy to the Martian camp, to accompany the Martian messenger. As he walked slowly inward, Waldon wondered. What would the President do? If the Martians were so strong, it would be only prudent to give way to their demands. On the other hand, once they had a base on earth, could they be trusted not to use it in a harmful way? Waldon shook his head wearily. If he acceded, the world was at least to be free of bloodshed for some time to come, perhaps long enough to discover a counter-

weapon for the Martian rays. Should he refuse, according to the word of the Martians themselves, carnage and destruction would be the earth's certain lot, such destruction as the earth had never known. The Martians had shown enough of their power to make one sure of that. Waldon shook his head again. At any rate, the decision was not up to him.

When the oddly assorted pair arrived in the Martian stronghold, Waldon for the first time saw hundreds of the little creatures. They paced about, stiffly and irresolutely, murmuring among themselves, and they stopped only long enough to listen to Ulla when she told of her ten-hour ultimatum. All through the night they paced in an aimless and serious fashion, while Waldon dozed and watched them, uncomprehending.

At the ninth hour, rendered nervous by the obvious uncertainty around him, Waldon joined the throng of milling Martians, and walked among them, his bulk towering over their small bodies. Suddenly struck with an idea, he stopped short: this might be his last and only chance to see what the planet Mars looked like. He turned and asked one of the malevolent creatures, in the Martian tongue:

"Have you any pictures of your planet?"

The Martian shot him an ironic glance.

"Pictures!" he snapped. "Pictures! With our means we can show you Mars as it is. We have no need of pictures. Our televisors can search the skies to the outermost limits of the solar system. Our power is great, so great that you could not hope to understand it."

"I'd like to see it," Waldon repeated.

"Come along, then," the Martian said.

Waldon followed him into the bowels of one of the space-ships, and he in turn was followed by a small group of Martian soldiery. They stopped in front of a liquid screen in a curved, metallic room. In it was mirrored a segment of the American trenches. The Martian blew with his hand upon a dial. Waldon was seized by an instantaneous nausea, as, from the screen, he received an impression of falling, and, rapidly, before his amazed eyes, a slowly turning red ball circled. With incalculable speed the ball flattened out, and Waldon felt himself flying over a level and desolate landscape. The sun in the distance was smaller, but the light was clear. He saw, as if from an airplane, a scene of unmitigated desolation.

When he came finally to a city, he noticed that it was empty and crumbling: there was only a mass of rock and masonry. Everywhere he received an impression of death and barrenness: there was no water, no moving object. The screen before him showed a dead planet, and the more Waldon saw the more puzzled he became. Here were no quarter-million space-ships ready to be launched into the void; here were no hundred million Martians, ready for the colonization of a sister planet. Picture after picture of crumbling walls spread before him: he saw not one living Martian balefully squinting at the heavens. He saw only a story of death.

As Waldon turned his head to ask a question, he noticed Ulla entering the room, angrily and purposely, and as she came in the screen flickered. "Fools!" she cried. "You know we have only enough power for ten days more!" She spoke, and a Martian turned off the vast televisor.

"Why—" Waldon began. "Where are your fellow Martians?"

The Martians stared at him, their mobile faces screwed fast, in sudden quiet. As Waldon looked, their faces again became swirling masks, and none replied.

Slowly realization came to Waldon, the knowledge that these tiny beings from out of space had indeed left a dying planet: they alone remained of a vast and teeming extra-terrestrial race. And their ultimatum? The last fraudulent gesture of beings so poor in resource that they could no longer put their own hereditary world to any use. Their ultimatum was a bluff, a gesture, a last hope. What had Ulla meant when she had said there was only enough power for a few days more? Why, it meant, simply, that they could not make good their threat against the world.

Waldon sprang forward, but just as he did so a sudden stillness fell over the Martian encampment. Into the calm, and unnaturally loud, fell the voice of the President of the United States, through what radio receiver Waldon couldn't tell.

"The powers have decided," the clear monotone said. "We must accede to the Martian demands. All Antarctica, south of latitude 60 degrees, is theirs for the taking. We guarantee them free passage there, and everlasting peace."

Pandemonium broke loose in the Martian camp when Waldon translated it. Waldon would not have believed it possible: the Martians bounded into the air, expanded, dwindled, and broke out into a gust of high-pitched, sardonic laughter. They laughed until they must have been weak with laughter, and still they laughed. They laughed in a mocking way, and there was also a note of happiness and relief in their laughter.

Waldon looked on in amazement, gaped at the usually staid and self-sufficient creatures. Two Martians, tittering and giggling, rolled gleefully on the ground in the front of him, and spoke in the Martian tongue to each other.

"And to think that the prisoner, asleep, told us about the game of poker!"

"And to think that a little bluff worked!"

"And us with only enough power left for a week of fighting!"

"A hundred million Martians! Wheeo!"

"A quarter million space ships! Wheeo!"

"And when they find out that there aren't any more of us. . . ." The Martian choked in a sudden recrudescence of mirth.

"They'll never be sure!" the other Martian shrilled. "They'll never know for sure!" And the little creature went off into a gale of laughter and hiccups.

The Martians gazed owlishly at Waldon, obviously knowing that he had understood every word they said, and then went happily onward.

Waldon thought it over, and slowly his grin stretched from ear to ear. "Well, I'll be a son-of-a-gun," he said. "But I know one thing. I'm never going to play any poker with any two-foot Martians."

THE END

Outcast in Space

By Arthur G. Stangland

(Illustration by Marchioni)

Suddenly we started. Below appeared two of the servants struggling over the ground with a crystalline vase. It contained a dead Martian.

Outcast in Space

by the author of
"The 35th Millennium"
"The Eye of Two Worlds"

ARTHUR G. STANGLAND

WE are inclined to think of our modern mechanized age as lacking in adventure. Those of us who yearn for strange places and strange deeds look back yearningly to past centuries as the true era of adventure.

But adventure is all about us, brought to us by the wonders of science. And in the centuries to come, the opportunity for stirring deeds will be no less present than when the pirate pursued his swaggering way across the Spanish Main. Adventures in the future will probably be different than in the past, but there will be no less of excitement, no less of the thrills of conquering difficulties, no less of red-blooded deeds and events.

To each of us there comes a time when we might have been taken from our lives, dull and uneventful and be precipitated into a strange series of events such as our author recounts of the year 2001. But would we have welcomed it with opened arms as did our present hero?

JAMES Hamlin Cord sat staring at the keyboard of his electric writer, his brows contracted in a dark frown. He sighed and looked up to glance over the rows of books on his library shelves, as if searching for some elusive thought. His eyes brightened somewhat at a row of books set off by themselves. They were expensively bound volumes, and each one bore the name "Cord" below the title.

But there seemed to be no answer to his exploring gaze there, and his eyes strayed to one of the radiant cylinders that cast a soft, sunglow over the library. He fidgeted in the deep, round chair, and withdrew a slender nicotined cylinder of tobacco from a silver box at his side on a table. Leaning back languidly, he drew deeply of the fragrant smoke and let it exhale through his lips in a thin, blue cloud.

Suddenly, he ground the glowing weed in a tray and rose, snapping off a switch on the writer. He crossed the heavy carpeted room to a davenport, and sat down aimlessly. At his elbow built into the end of the sofa were three controls and a tumbler switch. He tripped the switch and adjusted a knob with delicate fingers.

A dead mirror in front of him suddenly came to life, lighting up in a reddish - orange glow. It was about four feet wide and three feet high, and was built into the wall of the Futura-styled room to blend with its simplicity of line and contour. The scene resolved into a natural color picture of a man talking to the radio audience. In a fine, melodious, and well modulated voice he began:

"Ladies and gentlemen of the radio-television audience: the National Players are about to present the latest successful current play, *Metropolis*, written by that master of strange adventure, James Hamlin Cord. The Jacobs Galvanizing and Tin Corporation hope you enjoy it."

But James Hamlin Cord made a wry face, and touched a knob, fading out the picture.

"If they only knew how I sweated over that damned thing. Bah!" he muttered.

Another scene appeared on the mirror.

"You are now witnessing the wild revelry on the Grand Elevated Boulevard Level as the Twentieth Century draws to a close. Five minutes more and we shall be in the year, 2001 Anno Domini, and then . . . . . Yes, same to you, Jack. A drink? Sure thing—I never take a shingle off the roof . . . . ah! . . . . And now, ladies and gentlemen, of the television audience, as I was saying before, the year is drawing. . ."

The announcer droned on pointing out the different spectacular events of the New Year's celebration. Aircraft swarmed over the city streets swooping low to draw cries of fright from those below. Shafts of rainbow colored lights stabbed the darkness of the upper air lanes. Pyramidal skyscrapers shot up into the night like lone monoliths spaced far apart to allow a maximum of light and fresh air. Their gleaming, white exteriors reflected the brilliant display of night lights, softening to a mellow hue as they rose, massive and majestic, into the dizzy heights. Spidery bridges swung from them to the lesser nearby buildings. These were packed with reveling crowds of pleasure seekers drunk with gaiety. The noise coming through the speakers was terrific, as the clock approached midnight.

"Rot!" Cord exclaimed aloud to the room, "Th' same old stuff."

He shut off the apparatus, and turned the lights of the room low. Absently, he strolled over to the window, running the full length of the room, and stared out at the night. His ultramodern home far from the suffocating confines of the city overlooked the rolling country. From the brow of a low hill he looked out over a world

snow clad. Endless whiteness stretched out to the horizon where it met the lurid glare of the brazen city. Overhead was the deep blackness —a velvety cushion for displaying the rare, sparkling gems of the eternal spaces.

"Oh, for an inspiration!" Cord cried impatiently. "The 'Master of Strange Adventure,' bah! If my public only knew the sweat and sleepless nights that go between the lines of my novels. And to think I who never had adventure in my life, dare to write of it!"

He turned abruptly and went to a little square of buttons, depressing one of them. A butler appeared.

"A good stiff drink, Tony," the novelist ordered.

The man left to reappear quickly with a tray of several bottles of hard liquor and glasses and a bottle of carbonated liquid. Cord took a glass of whiskey, and downed it raw. He stood in front of the long window, staring with sombre eyes at the uncertain haze of the distant city.

With startling surprise came the low geared whirring of a helicopter descending from overhead. Tony and Cord stared wonderingly at each other.

"Someone's coming here," Cord exclaimed. "See who it is, Tony. I'm not at home to anyone, especially Reiflin. No more of his damned parties in town for me!"

THE writer turned out the lights, and stood by the window. He saw the plane settle lightly on the small concrete landing square in front of his home. From a tower at one side a big flood light automatically burst forth and Cord saw a cute little black ship—racy, fleet and expensive. Its rustless, shiny blades gleamed in the brilliant light, as it fluttered to earth like an ebony moth. From the cabin stepped a young woman in leather habit and helmet. She slammed the door and made rapidly for the house, tearing off her headgear. The watching man staring at the girl from his concealment realized that she was no one he knew.

Something about her, the swift desperate way she approached the terrace leading to the front door, made him change his mind about not being at home. Here was something mystifying, something out of the ordinary. Downstairs came the mellow chimes of the guest announcer. Cord descended to the entrance hallway just as Tony opened the door to receive the girl.

For a moment she stood at the entrance somewhat bewildered, looking first at the butler and then at Cord. Her black hair, a bit dishevelled, hung in wisps about her comely, refined features, enhancing the subtle appeal of a woman in distress. In the dark eyes was an expression of sharp sorrow. A healthy glow shone in her smooth cheeks.

"I'm so sorry to drop in on you like this, but—well, I wasn't at fault anyway. My motors went dead—burnt out, I guess, and I was just able to descend on my helicopter props," she exclaimed in a rich, vibrant voice, fumbling with her helmet in embarrassment.

"Well, that's too bad. Come in, won't you? You look cold." Cord assumed his most debonair manner supplanting the cool hostility of the previous moment.

"Oh, thank you so much, but really I can't spend much time here. I've had a call from home, and that's where I'm headed for now," she explained to Cord, as he showed her into a soft lighted living room. Rich it was, but simple in decoration with deep, pillow-soft chairs and heavy davenports. An air of cozy, snug comfort pervaded the apartment and its atmosphere, soothing to tired senses. One end and half of both walls were glass from the floor up, a veritable Crystal Room.

"Some piping hot coffee, Tony," the novelist ordered. He placed a squat, soft chair for the girl and sat opposite her, involuntarily forming a word description of the picture she made, sitting there before him and wearily removing her heavy outer garments. He noted the unpretentious but expensive clothes she wore, the graceful, but erect form and the intelligent face.

"I was at a New Year's party tonight when a call came for me," she was saying. "Someone at the other end said I was wanted at home immediately, and when I asked who it was he broke the connection. I don't know what to think, and I'm so worried, for fear something has happened to Daddy."

"I understand. You go to college, do you?" Cord asked sympathetically.

"Yes—Oregon State." She took the coffee Tony brought her, and enjoyed its liquid warmth, sipping it slowly.

"Hm—a long way from your starting point, eh?" the novelist exclaimed in surprise.

"My little *Royla* is a big demon for speed," she said, smiling, and Cord felt an unfamiliar thump in his breast as he gazed at the curve of red, moist lips and the full, soft throat. But her smile faded as quickly as it had bloomed. "However, it doesn't do me any good now!"

Cord rose to set fire to the logs in the fireplace, a relic of the early twentieth century that he had insisted upon when the mansion was built.

"Well, what do you intend doing now?" he asked, rising to watch the flames flicker and leap upward.

"I—I don't know," she hesitated, blushing prettily, "unless you can help me somehow. You see, it's only a short distance in an air line to my home from here. Oh, Mr.—Mr.—" she stammered.

"James Cord," he supplied.

"Mr. Cord, I hate to appear in the light of a troublesome intruder, but I'm beginning to feel that something terrible has happened at home. Could you, that is, would you take me there—right now?"

A Midnight Adventure

JAMES CORD, writer of strange fiction and thrilling adventure, looked into soft, dark eyes that looked back appealing. The flickering firelight shone like tiny pale flames of mystery in them, beckoning him on. But for a moment he considered. His latest novel was lagging flagrantly, even painfully. He should really stay to finish it. Yet the eyes, so soft and alluring there,

watching his as they mirrored the swift, rippling of his thoughts, held his own. He thrilled to the mystery of the encounter with this girl. It was fitting that at the end of this 20th century, as man stood on the brink of a great adventure in civilization, that he, James Hamlin Cord, maker of adventures should participate in them. It was the spirit of the day. She had come from out of the cold night, and would soon go back to it. Something powerful urged him on.

"But you haven't told me your name yet."

"It's Dinah. Dinah Lilliard," she answered, still waiting on his next word.

"All right, Dinah—I'm going to call you that—put your flying togs on again. We're going to take a midnight flight."

Built at one end of the house was a round-walled garage connected with the main wing of the writer's beautiful mansion. Inside reposed a stubby winged, fleet cabin plane that seemed to be constantly on leash so anxious did it look to be up and away.

"All right, jump in," said Cord, holding open the cabin door. The open doorway revealed a comfortable, richly upholstered interior with room for several passengers. She sank into a deep, plush chair beside Cord.

He held a tiny lever back on the board before him, until the garage doors were quite open, and then released it. The way was clear for flight. He closed a switch, and giving a perfunctory glance at a voltmeter, released the surging current to the motors. Came a soothing, humming from them as they took on the load. Out into the glare of the floodlights of his landing stage the plane rolled. And then with a burst of power it rose straight up on its lifting fans, and headed east.

On a screen before him was a changing scene of the earth below. It was the Nocturne eye, that clever instrument first built by a Scotchman at the beginning of the century that made possible this sight of the land below them. Infra-red rays were cast down to reflect back again on a photo-cell which translated the impulses to the television screen. Outside was a zero temperature night, but within the close padded confines of the cabin was snug warmth. The faces of the two were lit up in phantom outline by the reflection from the glass screen, and the various lighted dials and indicating meters. They had flown on steadily for an hour, speaking little, lulled by the rhythmic hum of the motors.

"Ah, we're coming to it now!" Dinah cried joyfully, breaking the silence between them.

"Where?" he asked.

"That tall building down there. Just a few more kilometers. It's my home. She pointed out the landmark that was the indication of the nearing of her house.

And then on the glass appeared a beautiful white residence set back from a road in a grove of stately firs. A plane rested on the landing stage at the side of it, and a blaze of lights showed in nearly all the lower floor rooms of the mansion.

"Oh, I wonder if daddy is seriously ill!" Dinah cried in alarm at sight of the plane. It was of a strange design, clearly not of the standard American makes. The girl beside Cord trembled a little as he descended to the stage alongside the other plane. She was at the cabin door instantly, and had bounded out to run swiftly for the house. James followed her and waited downstairs in a gorgeously appointed parlor. Again and again she called her father upstairs, getting no response. Her lovely voice echoed down the corridors.

"Why, daddy's not in the house anywhere. And all these lights on—I can't understand it!" Dinah cried nervously, coming back to Cord.

He felt a sudden thrill up his spine. Mystery was here. There was all the literary earmarks of it. A drama, a tragedy was in the making. His keen, observing mind made mental notes of this for future use.

"Perhaps your father was called out," he offered. But he knew this was no explanation. Something strange had happened before they arrived there.

"No, daddy has no place to go nearby. And anyway, he wouldn't leave the lights on. The servants are all out celebrating tonight," Dinah returned.

THERE was silence. Cord stood tensed, listening, waiting. . . . It was the silence of eternal space that grew upon the senses. The girl drew closer to him.

"I'm—I'm afraid," she almost whispered, looking anxiously about. He was suddenly sorry for her, a bit guilty in commercializing the incident in his mind. This was something real that affected living, breathing people, and was not a figment of his vivid imagination.

"Oh, nonsense, you're just im—"

Into the room strode a short dark-face, stocky man with drawn automatic covering the pair in the center of the room. Immobile and expressionless eyes stared at them from a big head placed like a bullet on thick, muscled shoulders.

"Dun' move!" the man commanded, in the strange accent that Cord recognized with a sudden thumping of his heart. The man was a Martian, a low caste member of the red planet. What was he doing in the house? The only ones that Cord had seen in this part of the country were employees in restaurants, and odd workers. Was this a hold-up? He laughed suddenly.

James Hamlin Cord had deftly handled many of his characters in such situations, but plain Jim Cord felt a peculiar, tingling sensation at the roots of his hair, when for the first time he eyed a gun from the other end—the end he was quite unfamiliar with.

"But, I say, what have we—," he started to ask.

"Shut up!" the small man barked.

"Where's my father!" Dinah shot back, defiantly ignoring his order.

"Never mind! Come!" he commanded, beckoning them to precede him out the door.

Quite unwillingly they were pushed out to the other waiting plane to find another one of the Martians. They were locked in a rear compartment of the big plane, and left to themselves, with a few tins of concentrated foods and some flasks of water.

The ship vibrated slightly, and then slowly and easily took the air with a suppressed hissing. Where they were going or how fast Cord or Dinah could not guess. All they knew was that it was a poorly heated cabin and made them shiver in the chill atmosphere.

"Perhaps, if we sat very close together, it would help to keep us warmer," Cord suggested.

"Oh, I'm glad you thought of that," she said thankfully. She snuggled against him in his arms on the thick cushioned seat.

He felt a bit awkward with his arms around a young woman, but yet there was something so natural and human about it that he quite readily took to the idea.

"Warm?" he inquired. No answer.

He leaned down, and then felt her shoulders quiver slightly. Quite helplessly he sat there wondering what to say or do to comfort her. Silently she wept, burying her head in his shoulders, shaking spasmodically.

"Poor Daddy! I wonder where he is?" she said at last.

The Lord only knew; he didn't, Cord said to himself. It seemed to get more mysterious, it appeared to him, now that the Martian villain—in this case, villains—had shown a hand.

"Does your father have any enemies, Dinah?" he asked, by way of evading her question.

"None that I know of," she returned.

There was something deep and dark in this, Cord thought. He realized that the inrush of Martians that had followed the Immigration Pact of 1985 had brought with it men of vicious and depraved natures. Yet curiously enough it was not the ugly low caste Martians who were evil. They were simply stupid, but on the whole good natured. Then what could be in back of this?

They continued in silence, listening to the hum of the motors, and sensing the rising and falling of the plane in the currents of the upper atmosphere. And then—both slept, lulled to rest by the rhythmic sound of the speeding ship.

The Martian Palace

"WHY, WE'RE getting down into Old Mexico!" Cord exclaimed aloud, blinking in the early sunlight, and staring down at the arid, parched land passing by slowly. The droning plane was at a great height.

Dinah stirred, and then look out into space, and finally downward. Her hand went up to her face in fright.

"Oh, where do you suppose they're taking us?" she cried in alarm.

The novelist didn't know, and in simple, plain English admitted his ignorance. But he had mental reservations. For some unknown reason it would be quite possible for them to be taken to wherever her father was.

There was good reason to believe, that a more brilliant mind was guiding these apparent dullards, for they seemed to be acting according to orders.

A flash, brilliant and intense, attracted his attention in the distance, and seemed to come from among some low foothills. They were adjacent to bare rocky mountains that already were beginning to shimmer in the rising heat of a Mexican day. He looked sharply at it, as the flash came again and lingered, while the plane rode the upper currents in a momentarily favorable position. And then to Cord's surprise, the plane slowly swung around to point in the exact direction of the flash. He no longer could see it.

Below, the desert was a thing of splendor, a riot of brilliant colors that were accentuated by the bright rays of the sun. Long shadows of sharp protuberances lay like fallen cathedral spires on the breast of the earth. Red alluvial material spread out fan-wise about the base of a lone mesa that looked like a medieval Norman castle. And by now the ship was coming lower and lower. He could see the blue sage, and here and there in places, white bones of animal skeletons. The plane suddenly banked to wheel in a wide circle.

"Look!" was all Cord could say, as he gazed in startled wonderment out of the window.

The scene below was one of impressive splendor, for there before their eyes was an immense building, a gorgeous mansion of translucent glass that sparkled brilliantly in the sunshine. And topping it all was a red sphere with peculiar markings and cross work on it, placed upon a tripod. Carrying out the general architecture of the building were tall, narrow windows of transparent crystal through which the novelist and the astounded girl could see luxurious, spacious rooms of strange, splendid design. It was a veritable Crystal Palace.

"Why, it's like a magnificent Martian mansion I saw once on the Red Planet," Cord declared, breaking the silence between them.

"Doesn't that big sphere remind you of Mars itself?" Dinah asked, looking at it fixedly.

The plane by this time was back of the imposing palace, and began to descend on its helicopter fans into a broad stage at the side of which was a glass hangar. Little men of bronzed skin and bulky physiques stood about watching the descending plane intently. As the ship touched the ground lightly, the pilots opened the door of their cabin and ordered his prisoners out.

"I think these are all a low type of Martian used as servants by the upper castes of the planet," the writer said, expressing his view for the first time as they marched along by the two little men. Into the huge mansion they were ushered through a great crystalline door that swung heavily on bright metal hinges. Discreetly, the pair took in everything about them, marveling at the richness of the furnishings, and the diffused glow of the sun through the glass walls. Deep rugs of modernistic pattern deadened the sound of footsteps on the smooth crystal floors.

They were shown into a large room of beautiful tapestry and bright metal work where they were to wait. One of their small guards disappeared for some little time.

"Dinah, this is the residence of a Martian, I'm almost sure. These aren't anything of Terrestrial origin," he told the girl beside him on the beautiful, upholstered divan. She looked back at him with fear in her eyes.

What a peculiar place for him to be in, Cord thought. Last night he was working on a novel

of adventure, and now by the inexplicable workings of Fate he has been plunged into a real adventure. But it was a mystery as well, for he was aware of strange things still about to occur.

"I'm so sorry to have gotten you into this fix," Dinah murmured softly, looking at James with a shadow of regret in her dark eyes.

"Oh, Dinah, don't feel bad about this on my account. So far, I've rather enjoyed it. It's something new for me. And I believe it will turn out to be of strange value to me, too," Cord reassured her, thinking of the muzzle of the gun he had looked at. He patted her hands.

The second of the little men came back to the first hurriedly, and in the slurring, odd Martian tongue talked rapidly and heatedly.

And then the writer and the girl were taken again to be shown through a hallway at the end of which stood another servant, dressed in white. He pulled back the door and they passed through a short foyer, the end of which was draped with beautiful crimson curtains. Passing between them the two were quite impressed by the immense high ceilinged hall that expanded before their eyes, greater than any they had yet seen.

Cord was delighted by the simplicity of design, and the luxury of the apartment, for there were many pieces of strange furniture arranged effectively about the room. On the walls were huge murals and big paintings of dry, desolate looking scenery. And one was a painting of the earth as a beautiful cloudy green sphere swimming in the black void.

STANDING before one of the long, high windows were two men. They were dressed in the summer garb of the tropics with short pants and light shirts, affording ample freedom of movement. One was bronzed, and dark haired, as if he had spent much time in the open. His sharp features accentuated by large, black and very intense eyes pronounced him at once as a Martian aristocrat. He was handsome and well proportioned, his being exuding that strange exotic Martian personality. The other man was older, grey at the temples, with yet a dynamic, youthful look about him.

"Daddy!" Dinah cried out running toward the older man.

The Martian turned with folded arms across a deep chest, and watched the glad welcome of the father for his daughter. Ah, the arch villain himself, thought Cord, studying the Martian. But something strange stirred him within, for the deep bronzed man gazed with open admiration at the girl.

"What are you doing here, Daddy?" Dinah asked, indicating the room.

"Well, you see, Dinah, I came down for a business conference with Nog* Boshl, from Bu Ton, Mars," Lilliard explained, and he turned to the suave Martian, "my daughter—Nog Boshl."

Boshl took her hand and stooping low kissed it with the grace of a native Terrestrial.

"And, Daddy, I want you to meet Mr. James Cord. He helped me home when I stalled in the *Royla*, and he's been so good to me."

"How do you do, Mr. Lilliard?" Cord said affably, accepting the introduction. And then he was presented to Boshl. Cord detected a strange light in the Martian's eyes, as he looked into them. It was animosity to the ninth degree. But outwardly, Boshl smiled.

"I do hope I am not intruding, Nog Boshl, but then of course, it was not of my doing. Being forced at the point of a gun does not make one quite amiable," Cord explained, watching Boshl's face.

"You we' force? But I am so sorry, Nog Cor'. Forgive me for my knavish men. They neith' understan' Terrestrial ways nor make explanations," Boshl said, deprecatingly. He turned on the two little men: "Fools! I thought you tol' me—," he broke off as if catching himself and then continued on in his own tongue, apparently upbraiding them.

They bowed servilely, to his words, and retreated from the room.

"Witless idiots!" the angered Martian exclaimed, as he turned to his guests. "They were instruct' to escor' you, Miss Dinah, as a guest down here. And I haven't been able to make them explain correctly yet why you were force' to accompany them, Nog Cor'. I regret the terribl' pighead' act ver' much. If you say so, I shall have you return' to your home," Boshl said suavely. James sensed an undercurrent of animosity. It was evident that he was to read between Boshl's words that his presence was distasteful to the Martian.

"Oh, James, do you have to go?" Dinah asked him.

"Well, I really don't have to go. I'm free to come and go as I please," Cord returned hesitantly.

"Good," she laughed, and turning to her father, asked, "Daddy, why did you want me down here with you?"

Lilliard glanced at the Martian, and then began stammering an explanation.

"Well, you see, Dinah—I—I kind of thought —well, ah—"

"Your father is rather tire', Miss Dinah, and expects to be my guest for sever' days while he takes a respite from business cares. So he though' it would be nice to have you with him; he hasn't seen you for so long," Boshl explained readily.

"Oh," said Dinah uncertainly, looking at her father.

"Er—yes, Dinah sweet. I've been pretty tired lately, so when I came down here, Nog Boshl thought it would do me good to stay and rest up," Lilliard returned.

Cord wondered why the man was so absently glancing out the window as he talked to his daughter.

"Well, James can stay for awhile then. I'm sure he'd like a change from snow and ice—that is if Nog Boshl doen't mind," she said smiling at the Martian.

"My house is at the dispos' of Miss Dinah and her frien' indefinitely," Boshl bowed low spreading his hands in an expansive gesture. Yet Cord noticed he focussed his attentions entirely on the attractive girl, seemingly forgetting the others.

*Nog—the Martian appellation for a Martian aristocrat.

An Ultimatum

THERE was something odd about everything, James mused as he stood watching the Martian talk. There was an undercurrent of feeling between the girl's father and him that he could not quite fathom. It did not seem entirely antagonistic, and yet the Martian, he sensed, exercised some sort of power over him. And then his veiled annoyance at Cord's presence.

Cord smiled, as he saw himself slowly enmeshed in a peculiar interplanetary entanglement, involved really as a rival of a Martian.

"Ah, you like my home here?" Boshl was saying.

"It's beautiful—gorgeous!" Dinah exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"This country remin' me so much of my own country outside of Bu Ton. Tha's why I build here in the Terrasas. The everlast' sun, the dry, parch' land, and the cold nights in the high altitudes—all like my belov' planet!" Boshl spoke ardently, fervidly, staring out at the distant mountains and desert.

"Do you have another place like this on Mars?" Dinah asked.

"Yes, but my esta' in Bu Ton is even more beautiful than this. The crystal for this place came out of my mines on Mars." And Boshl entered on a critical analysis of Martian architecture, displaying a keen appreciation of design.

"And you brought all this material from Mars to build this estate?" the astounded girl asked the Martian.

"Why, yes. A mere noth' to me."

"Yo see, Dinah my dear, Nog Bosh is one of the greatest mining engineers on the Red Planet. He even has mining interests here on Terra," Lilliard explained to the incredulous girl.

"Then you both have much in common," said Dinah looking at her father.

"Yes," returned her father shortly and he turned to a gold humidor to take out a cylinder of tobacco.

Boshl asked Dinah about herself, engaging the girl in a flattering conversation. But Cord was staring at Lilliard's hand as he lighted the cigar from a glowing electric filament. That hand trembled perceptibly, though the man tried hard to control it. He put the lighter down, and walked to a window to stand for a moment.

"Dinah darling, you'll excuse Nog Boshl and your dad for a while, won't you? We have some business matters to go over," he said, turning around, his eyes half closed in the cloud of smoke about his face.

"Why yes, Daddy, certainly," she returned.

Boshl, Cord noted, lifted his eyebrows very slightly at Lilliard's statement, but he rose to the occasion, though he seemed reluctant to part from Dinah.

"Ah, Miss Dinah, I'll have one of my men show you and Nog Cord about my place. I'm sure you'll see much of interest." And he pressed a little white button on his study desk. One of the men who had brought them here, appeared, dressed in the abbreviated garb of the tropics. His limbs were thick and hairy.

"T'Lo, I want you to entertain Miss Dinah and Nog Cord. Show them around the place, and be sure you don't mix things up again, fool!" the Martian commanded.

"Yes, Nog," said T'Lo, bowing. His face was imperturbable, Cord observed, as he and Dinah left to follow him.

"WELL?" inquired Boshl, raising his black brows questioningly, after the two had left the immense room.

Lilliard regarded the imperious Martian.

"My God, Nog Boshl, I can't go through with it. I can't give my daughter up, I can't!" he cried in a burst of emotional despair.

"So? Then you refuse my offer, eh?" Boshl said quietly.

"I may have done some off-color things in my life, but I stop at bartering my own flesh and blood!" Lilliard cried fiercely.

The Martian stood casually, serenely toying with a statuette, an ugly looking little monster of Stygian blackness.

"Then you are willin' to give up your vas' mining interests on Terra to me?"

"But won't you give me a few more weeks to operate so I can pay back your loan?" Lilliard pleaded desperately.

"Lilliard, you have false hope'. You know yourself, as well as I do that it will take man' months to clean out your Dombe shafts, and they're your most valuable. You have my ultimatum. Your daughter's han' in Terra marriage will square all accounts," Boshl declared with a note of finality.

"I can't, I can't—I won't!" The distracted Lilliard sank into a deep chair, and buried his drawn face in his hands.

Boshl patted the little statuette caressingly, looking at it with narrowed eyes.

"Lilliard, do you happen to know what this little god represen' on Mars?" he asked at length.

The mine operator looked up astonished by the abrupt change.

"Why—why, no," he hesitated, staring at it.

"It's the Martian God of Vengeance. Are you going to incite its wrath? Must I tell the world you are a murderer!" Boshl hissed in the man's face. Lilliard's face blanched white. "Wouldn't that sound nice to your daughter's ears, Nog Lilliar'?"

The man rose to his feet quickly, and raised a warning hand to Boshl, looking about the room, terrified.

"Sh!" he admonished, a pleading look in his eyes. "Have you Martians no mercy in your make-up?"

"Why should I, when you killed my half-broth', eh?"

"Nog Boshl, before God—and that's our most sacred of religious oaths—I swear that it was only accidental! What premeditated purpose could I have had?"

"Nevertheless, you have my threat, Nog Lilliar'. Think it over—carefully!" the Martian returned grimly.

"YES, this is my Vacuum ship, the *'H'Dona,'* meaning 'Stardus' in English," the Martian said proudly, slapping the sides of the gleam-

ing white monster. It bulged massively about the terrestrial planes in the glass hangar. It lay in its movable cradle like a sleeping giant. "One of the fines' on two planets!"

"Have you used it much?" Dinah asked, staring in awe at the powerful but beautiful craft.

"I use it almost exclusive' on my many business trips between Terra and Mars," Boshl answered, looking intently at the girl. "I'm leaving for Bu Ton very shortly—in fact, in several days. Gravitational attractions will be just right."

Cord caught a significant look in the handsome Martian's countenance as he glanced for a moment at the girl's father. He seemed to convey something in the look. Lilliard stood silent, looking at the white wall of the big ship before his eyes not one meter away but his eyes were unseeing. There was a brooding look about them.

"Perhaps you would all like a trip in the machine, eh?" Boshl exclaimed.

"Oh, I'd love it!" Dinah said enthusiastically.

"If it's immaterial to you, I'll stay down on earth," Cord stated, going off by himself as the others entered the hatchway door in the side of the ship.

"Oh, but I'd like to have you, too," Dinah cried out standing in the door. What a pretty picture she made, thought Cord—attractive, athletic, and vital. His pulse quickened at sight of her.

No, he didn't care to go—rather stay on earth and amuse himself about the mansion, he explained. The door banged shut with a muffled sound of rubber gaskets. He stood off to watch the plummet-shaped craft. From somewhere within came a deep vibrant hum, as if the sleeping giant had awakened. At one of the many ports that dotted the ship's sides appeared a face. It was Dinah's, and she was waving to Cord. He waved back, smiling. Slowly, the machine moved out on to the landing stage, and then majestically rose into the air and floated off into the upper reaches of the deep blue sky.

Cord went into the crystal mansion, strolling about aimlessly, wandering where his fancy took him. But soon he noticed he was never out of sight of a servant. They did not appear to be watching him, but nevertheless, one was always handy. He walked down a wide hallway and came to a little side corridor. Without thinking of where he was going, Cord turned to go into it.

"Sorry, one cannot go in there," a solemn-faced servant admonished him dispassionately.

The writer's curiosity aroused at once. He continued down the hallway, his mind a whirl of questions. Why couldn't he go in there? Why was he being watched? What was back of all this? He smiled as he thought of the rôle he played as a weaver of strange adventure. He had been Fate itself, moving his characters like pawns. But here the positions were changed. He was the pawn now, a helpless plaything of the vagaries of Destiny. Yet, he had come upon some peculiar things here at Nog Boshl's. It might be possible to weave a satisfactory explanation for them. For one thing there was a definite, observable link between the two mine operators that wasn't altogether of a business nature.

Cord thought he read fear in Lilliard's eyes during his conversations with the Martian. What strange secret could there be between these two men of different worlds?

Cord stood before one of the tall, crystal windows looking out at a clump of dried, brownish transplanted Martian growths. A meditative expression was upon his keen, penetrating countenance. He was again the author trying to place the incidents of the past day into an understandable drama.

Suddenly, he started. Below appeared two of the servants struggling over the ground with a crystalline case. Cord took a deep breath, for the case contained the mutilated body of a dead Martian. With difficulty they carried the coffin to a grove of palms mixed with peculiar red colored trees from Mars. Between the bolls of the tropical trees Cord was astounded to see one of the little men throw himself upon the transparent covering of the coffin, and clasp it in his arms, shaking and quivering in profound grief. The other looked at him a moment and then set about digging a deep hole in the hard, dry ground. And then, the sad task over, the two came back, one consoling the other. The writer stood as if transfixed. He was almost directly over the secret room, and the funeral party had emerged from there!

The Groan in the Night!

FROM overhead came a white flash, and the stellar flyer of Boshl dropped down behind the Crystal Palace to settle quietly to earth. Cord went to the landing stage, a puzzled frown on his face. A funeral party! He'd heard of no deaths among the Martian's servant force. And he had not been permitted in the secret room. Still, on second thought, that was natural. No one would want a stranger around at a funeral. And yet, he couldn't dismiss the lurking possibilities of a deep mystery behind that barred, translucent door below in the nether regions of the mansion.

"Welcome back to earth," he said congenially, as Dinah stepped from the purring monster of space.

"Hello! We weren't gone long, we're we?" she asked. An odd, perplexed look was in her dark, lovely eyes.

"You were only gone an hour or two," Cord returned, looking into her eyes steadily. Immediately, his intuitive, sensitive mind read that something distasteful had occurred to mar the trip for her. But he kept silent, as Boshl came out, proudly proclaiming what *"H'Doni"* could do in the way of speed, and how easily and delicately she handled in open space. On his face was a boasting smile of the one who is sure of anything he sets his mind on. Cord seethed inwardly at him. How he disliked his handsome black hair and brown skin! And in particular did he grate his teeth at the familiar way the Martian hung over Dinah.

Nog Boshl seemed in excellent spirits that night. He set his guests down to a lavish Martian dinner in a gorgeous, soft tinted supper room. Overhead the roof was transparent, and

through it came delicate, little shimmering pinpoints of starlight.

"And how did you amuse yourself in our absence?" the Martian inquired of Cord, his face flushed with the effect of a peculiar flat tasting Martian liquor.

"I found many things of interest about this place I never suspected before," James returned, looking back at the Martian enigmatically.

Instantly, Boshl's face lost its false humor. A look of suspicion came in its place, as he tried hard to read what was back of the cool and unwavering blue eyes of the writer. It was a silent battle of wits.

"You did, eh? And, for instance what was of interest to you mos'?"

"I was interested in the emotional break down of one of your servants this afternoon. I thought them beyond such expression," Cord stated matter-of-factly.

"Where did you see one of my servants give way to his feelings?" Boshl asked tensely.

"I witnessed one of their burials this afternoon by chance, as I was looking at the desert from a window."

The Martian seemed to turn livid in a moment. His hand shook as he quaffed a glass of the liquor. Then he appeared to get control of himself. He laughed.

"Ha, the one who wept like a child there was a brother of the deceased who like a waddling fool got careless and fell into a chemical vat in my workshop," he explained contemptuously.

Dinah sickened at the Martian's words.

"Oh, how horrible!" she exclaimed.

Boshl and Lilliard sat long at the table smoking and drinking. For one the Martian seemed glad when Cord suggested retiring to the immense living room.

"Yes. Go ahead you two. Nog Lilliard and I shall stay here and talk."

Dinah and the writer passed into the other room, a thoughtful silence between them. They stood at a window door, leading out upon a balcony high above the desert. In the distance, rising over a black mass of mountain peaks was the moon, a bright, gold disc. It shed its cool radiance in long shafts upon the desert, lighting it up like a world of fantasy. They went out upon the loggia in the cool night air. Dinah stood watching the moon, silently, pensively. James waited.

"James, do you like Nog Boshl?" she asked at last.

"No," he said quite bluntly without thinking. "Do you?"

"I don't know. He tried to be a little too attentive this afternoon on the flight. Daddy pretended not to notice it. I don't like his attentions forced on me," she said, as if considering her words. "I don't like Martians anyway. I feel as if they aren't human somehow. When I'm around Boshl, I seem to feel a relentless cruelty in him. I don't know why."

Cord stood quiet. The moonlight was gorgeous, and how it changed Dinah's hair and her lovely features! For a moment he looked at her provocative, red lips moving, forming words that he did not change into sense.

"I like Terrestrial men better," she said suddenly again, "like you James. You're so different than Boshl. You're human!"

Cord was in a giddy whirl of tantalizing desire. It happened naturally, easily and logically, that she should suddenly melt into his arms. Her lips met his, moist—sensuous, seeking them eagerly. A cool breeze stirred about them from the chill mountains.

"Oh,—I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—," Dinah began, breathlessly.

"Don't spoil it now. It's perfect, Dinah dear. I never realized until this afternoon that I cared for you even a little!" Cord said tensely. "You do care for me—a little bit?"

"Yes, James, I do. Oh, you're so much nicer than Boshl!" she cried, burying her head in his shoulder.

LONG AFTER the writer and Dinah had retired to their rooms, Lilliard and Boshl sat up.

"And no amount of argumen' will change your stubborn idea, eh?" Boshl raved.

"No. I won't give her up to an inhuman creature like you. Tell her if you like about my past, but she'll still be free of you!" Lilliard exclaimed fiercely.

The Martian sat looking up at the agitated man as he paused in his nervous pacing to glare down at him.

"All right, Lilliar', I am going to ruin you on Terra and Mars. Your mines will revert to me through defaul' on your part, and I shall give out the story of the murder to the press tomorrow. And if you entertain any hopes that I'll be held for withholding knowledge of the crime so long, don't forget that money is all powerful," Boshl stated slowly, evenly.

* * *

With a sudden start Cord woke up listening to the deathlike silence. Vaguely, he sensed something wrong. It was as if he'd heard a groan in his sleep. The impression was too real to dismiss. He got up, and slipping on a dressing gown, went out into the hallway. There it was! A faint groan downstairs. He hurried noiselessly down the broad stairway, and followed the gruesome sound until he came to the—secret room! His hair roots tingled frightfully.

He tried the door, and found it fast. Desperately, breathlessly he shoved and then discovered that it slid into the wall. From the floor came a fresh groaning. He found the light switch in the semi-moonlight.

"T'Lo!"

"Oh—oh, Nog Cor'—the flask—"

T'Lo lay on the floor writhing in extreme agony, rolling madly at spasmodic intervals. James glanced about the room to find the flask. On a shelf he found a glass of thick, black liquid, and stooped to the writhing Martian servant who grasped the bottle to pour its viscous contents into his throat. His excruciating pain seemed to subside slowly.

"You save' my life—I am grateful," he managed at last. "Nog Boshl—he's everything that's evil— He forced me to drink 'klakton,' the deadly poisonous syrup from the red tree, and

then lef' me to lie here within sight of the antidote on the high shelf out of reach!"

"You poor devil—but why, T'Lo?"

"Because we didn' watch you close enough today. You weren't supposed to see that burial of the man he killed just as he tried to kill me. I know more—because I was present when he killed his half brother, Luhrgo, at Bu Ton. Nog Lilliar' thought he did it, and Nog Boshl, the devil, let him think it, holding it as a weapon over the Terra man. Through its influence he got control of Lilliar' big mines on Mars and now he's been trying to get control of his Dombe mines here by wrecking them secretly so that Lilliard cannot pay back a loan that he forced on him," T'Lo spilled forth.

"So that's it!" Cord cried, his eyes agleam, a great flash of sudden understanding coming over him.

"And that's not all—he wants Lilliar' beautiful daughter. He's got her now out in the hangar to take her to Mars—"

James Cord swore sharply and dashed for the door, making for a room where he'd seen several high powered automatics. T'Lo followed him as fast as his weakened condition would permit.

He came upon the fighting mad Cord at the landing stage. The writer stood with a levelled gun pointed at the astonished Boshl. Dinah was struggling in the Martian's grasp.

"No you don't, you dirty cur—if you understand what that means—I've got the lowdown on you. In about a quarter of an hour the police will be here to get you for murdering your half-brother, and for criminally wrecking the Dombe mines!" Cord stood in the moonlight a ludicrous figure with tousled hair and rumpled dressing robe. A lower jaw protruded belligerently, as he pulled Dinah toward him.

Boshl stood white as a phantom at this direct revelation. His black eyes snapped in the half light, as he looked about for a chance of escape.

"They'll never get me," he cried, his handsome face working evilly. Suddenly, he pointed upwards, "Look!"

Cord glanced involuntarily, but immediately knew he'd been duped. Boshl was making a dash for the *"H'Doni."* Deliberately, Cord raised the automatic to fire.

"Don'!" T'Lo shouted, laying a protesting hand on the gun. James struggled with the little man. But Boshl had gained the safety of his monster ship.

"What's the idea, you fool," Cord demanded angrily, "letting him get away like that!"

The huge machine rose suddenly, and made rapidly southward, ever rising, a flashing white ghost ship in the moonlight. T'Lo stared long at the retreating massive shape.

"He goes to a much more terrible death, Nog Cor'," he said quietly. "Forever and ever he and his pretty little ship will float around in space. I know, because poor Nakla, the man he killed today, didn't finish refuelling the ship before Nog Boshl killed him for a forgivable, petty negligence. But Nog Boshl has taken a chance, and won't know he lost until it's too late!"

THE END

The Amazing Planet

(*Continued from Page* 551)

flight with looming sides in which a man-hole had opened.

Grappling-irons were thrown out, and the thing on which they rode was caught and drawn level with the ether-ship. Then, incredibly, someone had emerged from the man-hole, was standing above them, was cutting their bonds with a knife. Strong arms lifted them, and carried them through the air-lock into the warm interior of the *Alcyone*.

Half an hour later, after a course of vigorous massage to ward off possible frost-bite, and a good meal to fortify their starved and exhausted systems, they lay in their bunks and exchanged narratives with Jasper and the crew.

Jasper, it seemed, had been impelled by an intuition of evil to follow them with three of the men when they did not return to the ship within an hour after starting for that saunter among the woods of the Mercurian world.

They had traced Volmar and Roverton readily by their footprints, and had found their automatics near the animal-burrow. From there on, the trail was even plainer, with the multitude of strange tracks which gave evidence of capture by unknown beings.

Jasper and his companions had hastened on, running most of the way, and had sighted the alien space-flier in time to see the two men lifted aboard. The vessel had risen immediately afterwards and had flown slowly away in the twilight heavens, heading apparently for an orb which they identified as the second planet of the unnamed sun.

Hastening back to the *Alcyone*, they had given pursuit, and had managed to come in sight of the strange vessel once more, after many hours, as it landed in the white city at dawn. They had carefully located the huge, spireless building on whose roof it had gone down. Then, during the short, nine-hour day of the planet, they had hung aloof in space, waiting for darkness, with the intention of descending and making some effort to find Volmar and Roverton and rescue them.

Nursing this heroic and wholly desperate plan, they had seen the mechanism on which Roverton and the Captain were bound, floating up from the city like a mote in the fiery sunset, and had flown to investigate it.

"Of all the lucky breaks!" said Roverton, when the tale was finished.

"With that kind of luck," added Volmar, "I don't think that anything can keep us from navigating one or two more solar systems, at least."

THE END

Vandals of the Void

(*Continued from Page* 513)

other's blue-lit faces and the scene of stormy devastation beyond.

How long we stood thus I cannot say. It was probably no more than a matter of seconds, though it seemed ages. The ruin of the *Cosmos* close by us was still glowing and the vegetation it had crushed in its fall smoked fitfully. A red-hot girder from the shell rested across the trunk of one of those enormous tree ferns that are such a prominent feature of the Venusian landscape. The soggy mass of the bole resisted for a time the passage of the girder as the bursts of steam eloquently witnessed. But presently the heat of the metal forced it through the trunk and it fell with a clang on another girder, already prone on the ground.

The clatter roused me. It seemed, too, to have released the shackles from the others. A babble of voices came to me. Most of what was said, being in Venusian, was unintelligible, but presently I found a man who could speak Earth English—he had made one or two trips to our planet—and through him I was able to communicate.

The salvation of the little group was for the moment the thought uppermost in my mind. Cosmic destinies could wait until later. For a time we were out of the arena, through no fault of our own, and in the meanwhile it remained to be seen how we could best keep life in us.

How extensive the damage done in Shangun was we could not say, but Jansca and I and our Venusian friend—Gallivog, he said his name was—all agreed that we would only dimish our chances by making for there. The populous centers were almost certain to be dealt with first by the Mercurians.

But back of the city was a fern jungle, trees as thick round as six earth feet, and it was possible that in its depths we might find food and shelter of a sort. I learnt from our guide that vegetable life was prolific on the planet, and only the constant vigilance of the Venusians kept it from inundating their towns and cities.

Well, there was nothing for it but to take refuge in the jungle, and trust to the fates to find a way out for us. The Venusians themselves were more or less at home here, but Jansca, and I to a lesser extent, found the climate terribly trying.

She was used to the dry air and the warm plains of Mars, and this dank dripping heat sapped her vitality to an incredible extent. Fortunately we each carried our own private supply of Oxcta, otherwise I don't think we would have lived through it.

Most of the vegetable growths were edible, and we did not want for water, but what we missed most was flesh meats. True, most of the pools and lakes we came across were swarming with fish, but they were of a kind alien to us. The Venusians seemed to relish them, but somehow we could never adjust our palates to them.

The days crawled by. We managed to build a shelter of sorts in the jungle, and once that was erected Jansca showed signs of improvement, though she never quite became her old self. And all the time, day and night, the Mercurian fliers passed to and fro overhead, the sky dripping with the light of that blue ray of theirs. They no longer troubled to conceal themselves. With a brazen impudence they flew openly, satisfied they had the planet at their mercy. I had an idea, though I could not be sure, that they were looking for fugitives, perhaps searching for some hidden arsenal in the jungle fastnesses. But if so they never troubled us.

From the moment we had first decided what we were to do, I had put the little group under discipline; Jansca, Gallivog and I had organized the camp and apportioned to each one the work he or she must do, and I think it was partly due to this strictness of mine and partly to the way we camouflaged the camp that we were left so long undisturbed. One day Gallivog went on a scouting expedition to Shangun.

When he returned he reported that many of the buildings were still standing intact, but the Mercurians had landed and were beginning to occupy the place. Such Venusians as had remained in the city and escaped with their lives were being mustered and put to slave tasks for their masters.

His report, however, gave me an idea. I did not think it likely that the invaders had yet found it possible to conduct a house to house search and acting on that assumption I believed there might be weapons or food or other useful articles there that we would do well to acquire.

I would have gone myself, but I knew nothing of the layout of the city, and so quite likely I might blunder and bring down the attention of the invader on us. Gallivog and a couple of his friends, however, volunteered for the job as soon as I mentioned the matter to them.

I WAS glad afterwards that I did. They brought back quite a number of useful articles, ray tubes and charges for them, compressed foods and tinned liquids that could be warmed up mechanically. Gallivog, in a moment of acquisitiveness, had taken possession of a portable communicator set he had found.

On the face of it that was least useful of anything. It had only a local range; its impulses would not penetrate beyond the planet's atmospheric envelope, and even if they would we dare not take the risk of broadcasting signals through space. The Mercurians would almost certainly locate their source and through them us. We could only use the instrument in safety if a ship chanced to be passing overhead and we could swing a directional beam straight on her. Yet, if I had but known it, Gallivog's apparent foolishness was to prove invaluable to us.

For some days now we had seen nothing of the Mercurian ships, though we knew parties had landed, and were even now in Shangun. The ships themselves, I had no doubt, had drawn off to a base somewhere on the planet and were probably refitting. I was beginning to wonder

just how much longer we could hold out before sickness and, sooner or later, the lack of proper food and comfort began to thin out our little party when the thing itself happened.

. . .A thin thread of a whisper brought me out of my sleep, a voice close to my ear. For the moment I thought it was Jansca speaking to me, the next instant I changed my mind. It was her voice without a doubt, but it was not me she addressed.

"Ship of Earth," she was murmuring. "We are here in the jungle, Jansca Sanders, who is speaking, and her mate, the sole survivors of the Earth ship *Cosmos*, brought down by the Mercurian invaders."

The wild thought hit me like a blow between the eyes. The jungle fever I dreaded had got its hold on my mate. She was dreaming. . . .delirious. . Jansca delirious, the first stage in that awful Venusian jungle fever to which we Outlanders—Martians and Earthmen—seem peculiarly susceptible, and for which we have not as yet found any cure! The horror of it, piled on the other horrors we had already undergone, brought me wide-awake.

I reached out my hand. Jansca should have been beside me, within reach, but I struck only empty air. She had moved, was wandering not only in mind, but in body. The second dangerous stage.

Her voice went on. "Do not answer. You will only betray your presence. But our directional beam shows you exactly overhead, high in the clouds. I caught one glimpse of you, the steel ship of Earth, so different from the golden ones of the invaders. Can you rescue us? I shall cut out now and presently flash a light from our position, so that you may know exactly where we are."

I saw her now, a dim shape kneeling before something in the far corner of our rude shelter. I strode across to her and caught her by the shoulder. She gave a little cry that choked off as she realized it was only I.

"Jansca," I said in a quick whisper, "whatever are you doing?" I still fancied that her delirium had created wild fancies in her brain.

Her answer was a woman's, yes, this girl of another world differed little from the rest of her sex, whatever planet they come from. She dropped her head on my shoulder, and began to cry softly.

"I. . .I can't believe it even now," she sobbed.

"Can't believe what?" I demanded, almost roughly.

"That I looked out the door. . .stared up at the sky, and saw a ship, an Earth ship just showing through a break in the cloud ceiling."

"An Earth ship? If you saw such a thing, what makes you so sure it wasn't a Mercurian craft?"

"The color. . .the polish of cobalt steel. . .the lines of an Earth Guard-ship."

"You're mad, dreaming. . . .The fever."

"No. No. Dear one, it may have been a dream that woke me, that prompted me to creep from your side and look out the door, but what I saw was no vision, though it lasted only the tenth part of a second perhaps."

There was that in her manner which convinced me, galvanized me into action.

"You took a fearful risk," I said. "But never mind that now. Wake the others. . .quickly. I'll signal."

"But the light, Jack?"

"My ray tube. If I discharge it into the ground it will give flash enough for them to see. . . .if they are watching."

"God pray they are, that my message reached them. I trained the communicator beam directly overhead, just where I imagined the ship to be. I made it selective. It might have missed them."

"We'll know that soon enough. Hurry now."

She turned into the next shelter, which was really a separate compartment of ours. I took the ray tube from my torn and muddy jacket, turned it into the ground at such an angle that the discharge would splash a safe distance away. I pressed the button.

There came a blinding flash of light, and I heard the hiss of steam as the ray struck and volatilized the water content of some soggy Venusian plant.

FOR the space of a heart-beat nothing happened. Then abruptly it seemed to me that the clouds overhead were a little thicker than they were a minute ago. A second later and I knew it was not a cloud I saw, but the dim bulk of a space ship dropping straight as a plummet towards us.

She came to rest on an even keel a stone's throw away; lights suddenly flooded from her, and a port was thrown hastily open. A voice called, "Quick, whoever you are! We must make altitude at once."

I bundled Jansca and the others in unceremoniously. The port closed behind me with a clang, and I was nearly thrown off my feet by the rapid acceleration of the ship's rise. For a space I could not speak, could do nothing but gasp and blink in the unaccustomed light.

Out of the dazzling glare came a hand seeking mine, and a voice that cried, "Wonder of wonders, so it's you I've pulled off, Jack, old man."

Miracle of miracles! The voice that of Glenn Vance, my relief! The ship, my own Guard-ship, the old *E.22*!

"But how the devil did you get here?" I asked.

"Harran's orders, Jack. That man must have worked like the devil. He called in every available Guard-ship, made us junction just beyond the Moon and sent out a supply fleet to intercept us there. We fitted out and mounted our weapons as we came along. There's not an Earth Guard-ship left between Earth and Mars, and half the Martian fleet is only a day behind us. The rest's following with Tambard. We've orders to clean up this mess, no matter what the cost. Oh, but you're the man we want, the one who can tell us everything. The one person in the worlds I'm glad to have on board."

"There's a better with me," I said. "Jansca, a Dirka once, a Sanders now."

He flung a merry smile at Jansca.

"You'll have to look for the Mercurians," I

said, and told him as briefly as I could of the weapons he'd have to face.

"I didn't think it was as bad as that," he said. "Eighty ships you say they have. We've nearer two hundred, counting the Martians."

"You may swamp them by weight of numbers," I said, "providing you keep out of range of their rays. You've the atomic ray rigged? Good. What's its range?"

"We haven't tried yet," he told me." "We. . ." What more he meant to say I do not know. The alarm bell from the locators cut him short, and on the heels of that came a call from the observer.

"They're awake to us," Vance cried. "We can't see them, however." He was peering at the vision plate in front of him. "We'll simply have to trust to luck and the locators."

"Good," I said. "They can't use the ray while they have the invisibility force turned on. You've got that much. What about your other ships?"

He jerked a thumb towards the ceiling. "They're all right. They'll follow our lead."

Something flashed in the vision plate, a gout of blue flame. The ship reeled and for a moment I thought we were done for. But it must have been merely a blind shot, unless, of course, one of our ships had incautiously ventured too low.

The men in the power room, however, must have had their orders, for I saw one of them glance swiftly down his sights, then jerk the lever of his gun back quickly.

The blue flame in the vision plate vanished abruptly in an explosion of red-hot cosmic dust. That seemed to be the general signal to join battle. The Mercurians, confident in their superior science, came on disdaining all concealment.

One could no longer look at the vision-plate to see how things were going. It was a wild riot of hot colors that seared the eye-balls, light that crackled like a living thing and that filled the sky with terror and death. Back and forth the battle raged, the storm of blue rays and atomic jets.

For a time I thought the tide was turning in our favor, but gradually I began to realize with a sinking of the heart that our fleet was being forced higher and higher until we were struggling out in free space. Ever and anon one of the Guard-ships went dripping down in a torrent of blue rain, gleaming and molten, and the Mercurians grew more and more venturesome until it became evident that we were fighting a losing fight.

Jansca, close to me, looked into my eyes, and I saw my fears mirrored in hers. Once again we were facing the prospect of dissolution together and now a very few minutes would see the end.

Abruptly I became aware that the vortex of the battle seemed to have receded. It was dropping below us, nearer to the planet's surface. Then, too, there were more Guard-ships; space was filled with them; they were dropping like hawks out of the void.

"The Martians, the Martians are coming!" Jansca cried with a note of joy in her voice.

It was true. The Martian fleet Vance had mentioned as being a few hours in our rear had overtaken us. We were saved, and the Mercurian fleet, by sheer weight of numbers, was being beaten back into the mud from which we could wish it had never arisen.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Pendant

THERE is little more to tell.

Crippled and broken, the Mercurian fleet was chased and destroyed to the last ship, and the bruised and battered planet left to recover from its wounds.

But for my own part I am not so sure. It may be that we have merely postponed the evil day, for after all the invaders seemed our superiors in many branches of science. The secret of their blue ray, or rather the manner in which they generated it, for instance, still eludes us.

Neither have we learnt how men like Nomo Kell—for it is certain that he was not the only spy moving about in interplanetary circles—managed to reach our worlds and establish their citizenship there. If there were any traitors amongst our people—a thing I do not care to believe—the germ of an explanation might lie in that. Myself, I do not think that we shall ever be free from the possibility of invasion or solve these other mysteries until the day when we feel we are far enough advanced to send our own expeditions out against this world which has once threatened the security of the inner planets.

Meanwhile I have Jansca to occupy my thoughts and fill my heart to the exclusion of all else. She is the best of wives and mates, as proud of me as I am of her, though perhaps the proudest moment of our lives was when she was given her badge, and made a member of the Interplanetary Guard with the same rank as I hold myself. She values that little silver emblem more than anything else the planets can give her. In an idle mood I sometimes tell her she cares more for it than she does for me. But that I know she does not, for has she not again and again given me ample proof of the depth of her love?

And I? Well, I have told my story, and I would rather not repeat here what the Council said to me. It was flattering, all too flattering, and totally undeserved. I had little or nothing to do with bring about that final crushing defeat of the Mercurians; anything to the contrary I deprecate and most strenuously deny as far as courtesy to my superiors and the etiquette of the Service will allow.

But I shall always maintain, and Jansca agrees with me to the last least letter that the real saviours of our planets were the men who died the night the blue ray of the Mercurians sliced the *Cosmos* as a hot knife will slice through butter. Arenack, Hume and my wonderful crew of gallant Martians, I salute your shades. May the God of the Planets balance the manner of your passing against whatever faults you had in life, and bring you to that ultimate Elysium—by whatever style we care to call it—where weary heroes find rest and peace at last.

THE END

THE READER SPEAKS

In WONDER STORIES QUARTERLY only letters that refer to stories published in the QUARTERLY will be printed

Page Methusaleh!

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

The ingenious novel, "Into Plutonian Depths," by Stanton A. Coblentz, is quite in the tradition of the great wonder stories, from Lucian to Wells, in which a satire on the institutions of our own planet is presented in the guise of a voyage to unknown realms. One of the best of these, "Symzonia," was the first science fiction story written in America. It described, incidentally, in the year 1820, the rocket-propelled vehicle and the airplane; and it is worthy of being reprinted as a curiosity of literature.

The idea of overcoming gravity by a screen was suggested in 1847 by Dr. J. M. Riddell in a story which he published as a small pamphlet at New Orleans; and which very interestingly anticipates, in its concept, Wells' "First Men in the Moon". However, merely for the sake of inducing a better appreciation of the problems of interplanetary travel, and of the distances to be dealt with, it may be well to correct a few misapprehensions which will arise in the minds of readers who do not stop to make calculations.

Except for the case of the moon, and perhaps of the inner planets, it would be impossible to apply the principle of gravity screens to interplanetary navigation if only because of the *time* required to make the journey.

Let us accept the hypothesis upon which such stories are based: *i.e.*, that it is possible to cut off the gravitational field on one side of a body, at will, without affecting its inertia.

We proceed to "fall" from the earth to the moon, under the gravitation of the latter, assuming that of the former has been negatived. At the surface of the moon, after a lapse of some weeks, we arrive with a velocity of about a mile and a half a second. (While the acceleration of gravity of the moon at its surface is about 5.5 ft./sec./sec., it is only about one fifty-thousandth as great at the distance separating us from our satellite.)

But, since it is not our desire to collide with the moon, we must shut off our power at a suitable distance, and permit the moon to coast by us, as suggested by our author. This may be done at a distance from the surface less than the moon's radius, and at a velocity around a mile and an eighth per second.

We then proceed to fall toward Mars: if Mars is at a distance of say, forty-two million miles (a fairly favorable placement) his pull at that distance will accelerate our progress at the rate of .00000039 of an inch per second per second! Were it not for the velocity we have already derived from the moon, Mars would make the complete circuit of the sun long before our progress was astronomically appreciable.

The same consideration applies to Saturn and Uranus: the story describes the checking of the acceleration toward them at great distances from the planets. Yet it is only in the last few radii of distance from a planet that the acceleration becomes great.

The formula of the acceleration of gravity is well known to most readers —that it varies inversely as the square of the distance from the center of the planet. That of the accumulated velocity is less familiar — that it varies inversely as the *square root*. For instance, the velocity of fall from an infinite distance upon the visible surface of Saturn is about 22 miles per second. At a distance from the planet's center of 3,616,000 miles, or one hundred times his radius, it is only one-tenth of that figure. A table is appended for the reader who wishes to make a few approximate calculations.

Adding the combined attractions of the planets, as described in "Into Plutonian Depths," we find that we are far from approaching 400 miles per second.

And, if we could reach that velocity, the entire attraction of the solar system, or even the Galaxy, would be insufficient to stop us from going forth into cosmic space! The attraction of the sun, at the orbit of Neptune, is not enough to prevent a body receding at even five miles a second from making its escape.

Returning from Pluto, under the influence of the sun's attraction, we will have a much greater force operating upon us. Yet it will take us, under the sun's full attraction, about fifty years to fall to the orbit of the earth!

It is evident that the time required to cross the radius of the outermost planet, in the manner proposed, will be beyond the span of human life.

The author has not considered the application of a greater velocity than that which would be obtainable in the way he has described in detail—that is, the earth's orbital motion of 18.5 miles per second. Releasing a space traveller from the gravitational pull of the sun would send it out at a tangent to the orbit which it was following; and the speed already attained, by selecting a proper time, would enable us to reach the orbit of Pluto, at a point say 3,700,000,000 miles from the earth, in 200,000,000 seconds; or six years and four months.

The prompt and expeditious way is to drop from the earth almost directly to the sun, in 65 days, pass his surface at a speed of 383 miles per second (we must be impervious to a heat greater than that of the electric arc) and sweep outward at this speed, now unchecked by the solar attraction. We will then cross Pluto's orbit in less than four months more but, as explained above, without any means of checking our progress. (In order to drop toward the sun, however, it must be remembered that it is necessary to overcome practically the whole of the *earth's transversal, or orbital speed,* of which we partake while we are on her surface.)

The story makes mention, in passing, of the use of rockets; but goes into no particulars as to their use. At present, the problem of obtaining in this manner the eight- or nine-miles-per-second velocity required for an expedition to the moon is engaging the attention of the most learned interplanetarians; and practical discoveries furthering this end will be most joyously received. We may feel

(*Continued on Page* 574)

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THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from Page 573)

assured that Pluto is not the first heavenly body which will present itself for exploration; notwithstanding the mystery which makes it at present perhaps the most intriguing.

A—Average Radius of Body Miles.
B—Acceleration of Gravity at Surface feet/sec./sec.
C—Velocity* of Liberation from Planet's surface. mi./sec.
D—Average Radius of Orbit in Millions of Miles.
E—Velocity of Liberation from Sun. Miles/sec.

	A	B	C	D	E
Sun	433,000	900	383.0	—	383.0
Mercury	1,500	13	2.2	36	41.4
Venus	3,790	30	6.6	67	30.7
Earth	3,960	32	7.0	93	26.2
Moon	1,080	5.3	1.5	0.24	26.2
Mars	2,110	13	1.5	141	21.2
Jupiter	43,300	87	37.0	483	11.5
Saturn	36,200	36	22.0	886	8.5
Uranus	15,400	32	13.0	1,783	7.4
Neptune	16,500	32	14.0	2,793	4.8

*Note: the "velocity of liberation" is equal to the speed with which a projectile arrives when falling from an infinite distance. It is also the speed necessary to escape from the attraction of a body; but keeps lessening (because of decreased attraction) as the projectile gets further and further away from the attracting body.

C. P. Mason,
302 West 22nd St.,
New York.

(We are very glad to get from Mr. Mason this brilliant commentary on some of the fallacies of travelling in space simply by negating the gravity of the earth. As Mr. Mason indicates, it might be done; but the time required for a trip to Pluto, for example, would be tremendous. The table Mr. Mason has appended should be of great value, not only to readers, but also to writers who plan to write stories of interplanetary expeditions and wish the mathematics of their stories to be correct.—*Editor*)

Sorry It Hit You

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

Your latest issue was positively a "WOW"!! It was all good from the Sun to Pluto!

"Into Plutonian Depths" was a masterpiece of Science Fiction. The description was so vivid that you could see everything that the author saw. To be able to write so well needs a talent that most authors haven't got. With every new thing that comes out little authors will play around with it and then drop it. But then Stanton A. Coblentz will come out with his masterpiece. I remember that one man said that he didn't like the story "The Sunken World" but that you couldn't judge an author by just reading one of his stories. Well, I agree with him on that, but I think that Mr. Coblentz has not written any stories, that I have read, that my my mind are not in a class by themselves. There was one story of his that I think cannot be surpassed by even his Majesty the "Moon Pool". That story was "After Twelve Thousand Years". It is needless for me to say, lets have more from Mr. Coblentz's pen.

"The Empire of Glass" by Frank Miloche was a story that showed real planning. To my mind it didn't contain much science. But it did show a very plausible fact that the insects might grow larger as well as grow in numbers. Taking the story generally it was very good.

"The Winged Menace" by Packard Dow was a very good story. To my mind though it would have become known if any horde like the "Winged Menace" existed. The story contained some good science and plenty of food for thought. Keep up the good work, Mr. Dow.

I am also a friend of Forrest J. Ackerman and Jim Nicholson and a member of their club. I am hardly in a position to agree or criticize either one of them about the "Scarlet Planet" for I did not read all of it, but I think that both are somewhat right. In general the part I read was very good.

Here is a brickbat to even up things a bit, don't let it hit you in the head, Editor. Watch out! The story "The Inverted World" by Rogers Ullrich was the worst story in the issue. If it had not been for the ending I should have dropped the book in disgust. It did contain some good science and was plausible but that was all. Too bad, Editor, I am sorry it hit you. I hope it didn't hurt much.

Day Gee
(member of B. S. C.)
1817 Bond Ave.,
East St. Louis, Ill.

(Mr. Gee should not feel sorry for us. For even the editorial brain can err at times and choose a bad story. And when our readers jump on us, we step out of our bath of roses and into a rain of brick bats. It's good for us!—*Editor*)

An Actual Battle Was Fought

Editor, Wonder Stories Quarterly:

I was attracted to your magazine by a cover—a silver cover with a huge green, one-eyed monster smashing a space ship. You probably recognize it as the cover for the Summer 1930 issue.

Now I have the Spring 1931 issue and the cover has a tremendous appeal. The stories inside are just as good. The best, however, was "When Planets Clashed". I always wanted to read a story wherein an actual battle was fought between the planets. I received my wish, for the story was marvelous.

I think "The Empire of Glass" was a close second. In most of the stories the insects go down to defeat before men. What a change! Here man was ignominously defeated and how! The way they escaped the insects was excellently worked out.

The next best was "Into Plutonian Depths". It was rather a new idea to show man as a queer specimen from the standpoint of other animals.

The other stories were equally good. The story, "The Inverted World", however seemed incomplete. There was no train of thought or definite plot that I could find. Was I wrong?

I think this issue was one of the best yet.

James McRae,
7024 Vandyke St.,
Tacony, Philadelphia,
Pa.

The Gambler

He gambles that a "lucky break" will come to him in the course of time

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You get discouraged. You begin to feel that fate is **AGAINST** you. You complain secretly about your ill luck. Perhaps you hide your shortcomings behind a whole flock of easy **EXCUSES**.

But the hard, cold world doesn't care about you.

You've got to look out for **YOURSELF**.

Time alone cannot help you. If it could, **EVERY** man over 70 would be rich.

You cannot **COUNT** on luck or fate or circumstances. If you could, **EVERYBODY** would get rich at some time or other.

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